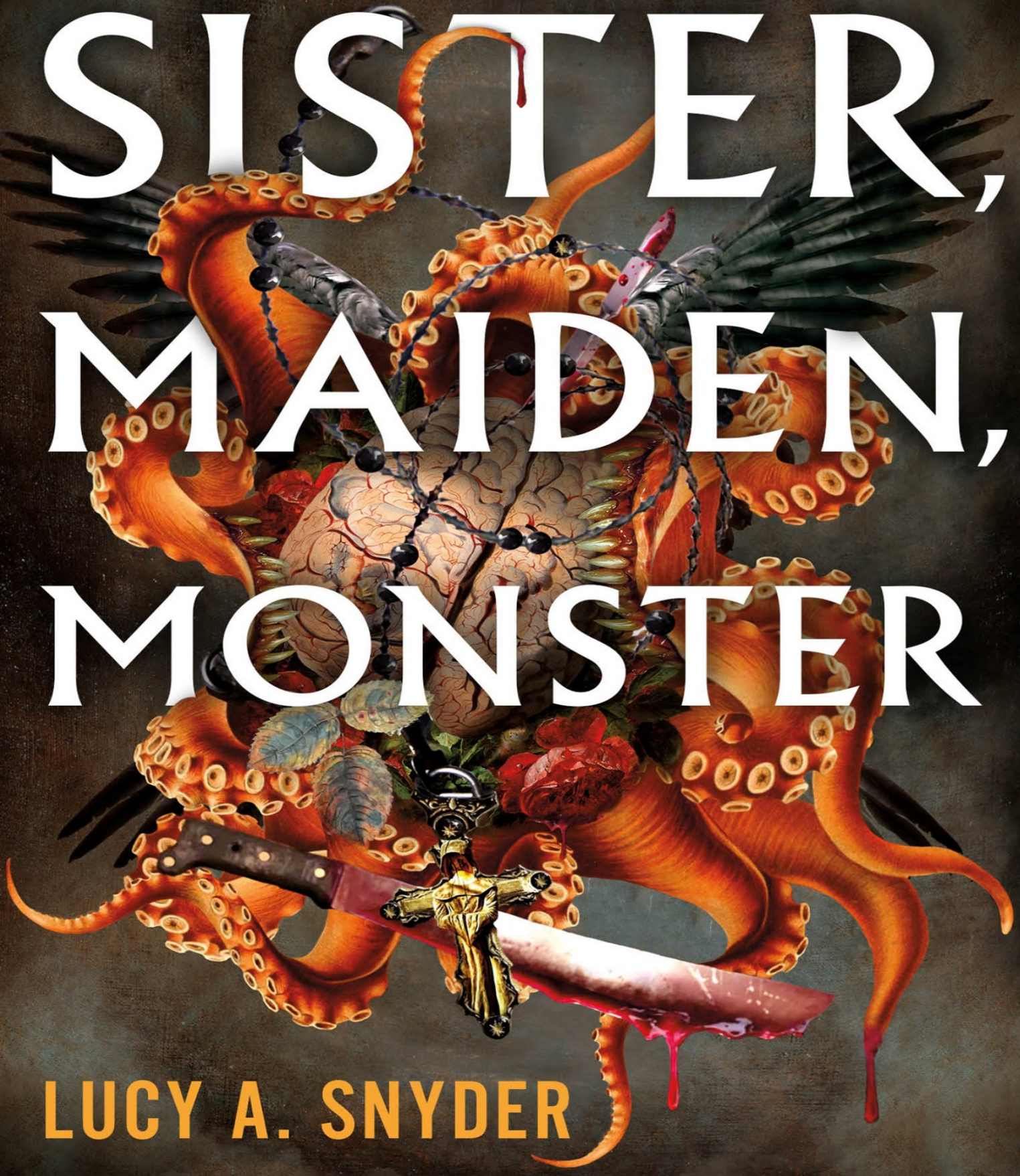
"Absolutely recommended for readers of the cosmic and gloriously horrific."—SEANAN McGUIRE

SISTER, MAIDEN, MONSTER



LUCY A. SNYDER

BRAM STOKER AWARD–WINNING AUTHOR

SISTER, MAIDEN, MONSTER

LUCY A. SNYDER

NIGHTFIRE

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For Erica M., Jaymie W., and Carol S.
Here's a toast to surviving our own personal apocalypses

PART ONE

MAGDALA AMYGDALA

I was bound, though I have not bound.
I was not recognized. But I have recognized
that the All is being dissolved,
both the earthly and the heavenly.

—The Gospel of Mary Magdalene

CHAPTER 0

It was only Tuesday evening, and I was already bone-tired. Wrung out. I stepped through the front door of our apartment, peeled off my white disposable KN95 filter mask. Dropped it in the small beige plastic trash bin my boyfriend, Gregory, had mounted on the wall. Squirted hand sanitizer into my palms and rubbed the stinging gel all over my hands and wrists. The alcohol burned inside my nose. I rolled my neck and shoulders to work some of the stiffness out. Unbuttoned my green wool peacoat and hung it and my purse on the coatrack.

I blamed my exhaustion on stress and anxiety. Last week, the world had gotten the worst Valentine's Day present ever: a new pandemic called PVG. Polymorphic viral gastroencephalitis. It had popped up in London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Toronto, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Seattle, New York City, and Mexico City at roughly the same time, which made finding Patient Zero (if he or she existed) a challenge. Nobody knew yet where it had come from, exactly how it spread, or what it was likely to do in the long run. All anyone knew for sure was that it was landing people in the hospital with scary symptoms.

Someone on CNN described it as "the stomach flu on nightmare mode," but apparently it wasn't an influenza virus. Or a rotavirus or a norovirus, everyone's favorite cruise ship plagues. It was something new and strange. Our governor hadn't declared a mask mandate yet, but many of us instinctively fell back on the protective measures we'd learned during the coronavirus years.

It was a relief to be home. Home felt safe. The outside world? Not so much. Even though Gregory and I had built a pretty cozy space for ourselves, I hated the idea that we might be in for months of depressing isolation and shitty delivery food. Months of mostly only getting to see the world secondhand, through screens. I silently prayed that the disease would burn itself out quickly.

“Erin, is that you?” It sounded like he was in the dining room.

“Nope, I’m a burglar.” I hung my keys on one of the brass hooks below our coupon-plastered corkboard. “I’m here to steal your Funko Pops.”

“You’re early! I was expecting the robbery around six thirty.” His tone was cheerful but held an anxious edge.

“Yeah, there wasn’t much traffic this evening.” It occurred to me that I’d just touched my keys, which I’d previously handled with possibly contaminated hands … so I gave myself another sanitizer squirt. We were probably going to have to buy the stuff by the gallon before this was over. Hopefully there hadn’t been a huge run on the stock at Costco yet.

I continued: “It looks like most of the other companies on the West Side have already shifted to work from home.”

My company was headed that direction, too, but it would be another week at least. Universal Corporate Computing had a huge, stegosaurian bureaucracy; change came slowly, when it came at all.

“That’s cool … but don’t come in here yet!” I could hear the scrape and clack of him shuffling china plates. “And don’t look down the hall! Just, uh, look at your feet or something.”

“Okay…” I stared down at my black Chuck Taylors and shucked them off with my toes.

A bright pink business card on the floor below the trash bin caught my eye. I picked it up. The card had an all-over design of fuchsia roses on a light pink background. It bore only a name—Savannah—and a local phone number. No business name, no address.

I didn't have much time to wonder about the card, or to think to apply yet more hand sanitizer, because Gregory gave a triumphant "Ha! Done!" and rushed into the foyer, his white shirtsleeves rolled up and his shirttails half out over the belt of his khakis. A brown substance I hoped was chocolate was smeared on his breast pocket.

"Don't look!" He blocked my view of the dining room, waving his arms like he was playing defense in a pickup basketball game. "Cover your eyes, please."

"Uh, sure." The alcoholic goo hadn't quite dried on my hands, so I tucked my upper face into the crook of my arm. Pandemic dabbing.

He took me by the elbow and led me down the hall. As I stepped from carpet to the vinyl planks of our dining room, I smelled soy sauce and burning candles.

"Okay, open!" he declared proudly.

I dropped my arm and beheld our small dining room table decked out in fresh red roses and pink carnations, gold-and-silver streamers, and candles. A glittery gold HAPPY 5TH ANNIVERSARY! banner hung from the wall. Amidst the table decorations was a big platter of fresh sushi decorated with edible blossoms, two place settings from the good china set he'd inherited from his grandmother, lacquered red chopsticks, tall wine flutes, and a dewy green bottle of Riesling from Schaff's Winery. Their vineyards were south of the city, and we'd gone on a tour there the first weekend we spent together, when we first started dating.

"Ta-da!" He spread his arms wide. "Are you surprised?"

I stared at the table, confused. "But our anniversary isn't until next week."

Then panic surged in my throat. Oh God. Had I gotten the dates mixed up? I'd ordered him a new tablet, but it wouldn't arrive for a bit. "It's not our anniversary *today,* is it?"

He laughed and said reassuringly, "No, our anniversary is next week. You're fine. But it wouldn't have been much of a surprise if I threw this the day of, would it?"

“No, I guess not.” I stared at the table, feeling a little stunned. And deeply touched. None of my previous boyfriends had ever done anything like this. Not even my family had thrown me a big party like this for my birthdays, not since I’d turned ten. Part of me was thrilled, but another part awkwardly wondered if all this was really for me or if I’d suddenly crossed over into the life of some other, more fortunate woman. “Wow, you went all out.”

“Ope!” He’d noticed his shirttail was flopping loose, so he quickly tucked it in, smoothed his short brown hair, and then pulled my chair out for me.

I sat down, absently setting the rosy business card on the table by my plate. “The sushi looks great.” There had to be at least ninety dollars’ worth of artfully sliced rolls and sashimi on the platter. Mostly salmon, tuna, and barbecued eel. My favorites.

“I got it at a new place called Oiwai Sushi.” He smiled. “My boss took our team there for lunch last week. I was really impressed with their tako sashimi. It was nice and firm and fresh. Not watery and limp.” He made a face. “The last time I got it at Hibachichan, it was really disappointing. Like it had been frozen and thawed a couple of times.”

“Yeah, they seem to have gone downhill since their chef quit.”

“Well, you know me … I like to support good places. Especially when it looks like they might be in for a rough ride.”

“Yeah.” I used my chopsticks to grab a couple of pieces of salmon sashimi for my plate. Perfect glossy rectangles of orange fish secured to plump mounds of rice with savory seaweed bands. My mouth was watering in anticipation. “So many good restaurants went under last time … I hope that doesn’t happen again.”

“Your words to God’s ears,” he said. “Anyhow, let’s talk about something more cheerful. How was your day?”

“Pretty good, all things considered. I ran into Mareva Buduci in the lunchroom today and we got to chat about the new Spider-Man movie for a bit before I had to get back. That was fun.”

“She the one you hit it off with at the Christmas party?”

I nodded. Mareva and I had bonded over the new megacephalopod species scientists had recently discovered in the Pacific, when she overheard me geeking out about it. She had a life sciences degree, too, but had gone further and started her Ph.D. I envied her a little for that, even though she'd had to quit for health reasons. "Yep. Nerds of a feather!"

He poured me some wine. "You gonna ask her to hang out after work sometime?"

"Maybe." I took a sip. It was just as sweet and crisp as I remembered. "Right now, it seems like a bad idea to make any social plans."

He nodded slightly, looking pensive. "It's hard to know how careful everyone is, or where they've been."

The cryptic pink business card on the table caught my eye again.

"Speaking of going places…" I picked up the card and flashed it at Gregory. "Where the heck is this from?"

He stared at the card for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then he rolled his eyes and smiled sheepishly. "Oh, that. That's just trash. I was thinking of getting you a massage, and went around to a half dozen places to check them out. After the virus news broke, I tossed all the business cards I picked up. Must have missed the bag with that one."

"A massage would have been nice." I smiled and put the card down. "But honestly, I'm just as happy with wine and sushi."

"Well, this isn't *all* of your present. Though the rest isn't exactly a present. I mean, there's cake for dessert. But the other thing. I mean. Wait. I'm babbling, aren't I? Sorry." He rubbed his palms on his khakis as if to wipe sweat off them, looking nervous and excited.

I nodded, confused. "It's okay, honey. But what do you mean?"

He cleared his throat, stood up, and smoothed the front of his shirt. Took a deep breath, stuck his hand in his pocket, and strode around the table to me.

"What are you—" I began.

He pulled a red velvet box out of his pocket and got down on one knee beside me.

“Will you marry me?” He opened the box to reveal a glittering, expensive-looking engagement ring. A large, sparkling square diamond flanked by two smaller diamonds on a burnished gold band. At least, I figured they were diamonds. The way they caught the light was mesmerizing.

I was stunned into absolute silence for a moment. Sure, I’d assumed that after five good years, Gregory and I were in it for the long haul, but we’d never really talked about formalizing things. After having spent my teens and college years dating casually indifferent boys and men who mostly all thought a fancy date meant going to Olive Garden, I’d never expected to be the recipient of a grand, romantic proposal like this. I hadn’t imagined it, not once. My brain just didn’t know how to process what was happening.

“Wow,” I finally said, still staring at the expensive-looking ring.

His face fell a little. “If you don’t like it, I can exchange it. We can go look at rings together. I know I should have had you pick out something you like, but it was hard to do that and make this a surprise—”

“No, it’s great,” I assured him. I’d never been especially girly, and since I seldom wore jewelry, I knew close to nothing about it. The ring was pretty, and it wasn’t ostentatious. “It’s *perfect*.”

He beamed up at me. I scooted my chair around, took his face in my hands, and kissed him deeply.

When we both came up for air, I said, “But.”

He looked nervous again. “But what?”

“But … what brought this on? I mean, we haven’t talked about marriage. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not opposed! I just … want to know what’s happened to change your mind.”

He took a deep breath. “First, I love you, and I want the whole world to know. But the other thing is … the pandemic could last years, like it did before.”

“We don’t know that for sure.” I definitely wasn’t connecting the dots on what he was telling me yet.

“I know. But hear me out. During those years, one of the worst parts—for me, anyway—was feeling like I couldn’t make any plans. Like I didn’t have anything to look forward to. And I want us both to have that. I want us to plan a cool wedding together, and an even cooler honeymoon. I want us to get a house together. A house with a real yard, where you can have an amazing garden. We could have a kid. Maybe a couple of kids. If you want! We could start with a puppy or kitten first. Probably should, in fact.”

He paused anxiously. Tears welled in his eyes. “I mean, if you want all that with me.”

My heart seemed to melt into warm, pink, sugary goo in my chest. “I do want that with you.”

“So you’ll marry me?”

“I will.”

“So, try the ring on! Try it on!” He was adorably excited.

“Okay,” I laughed. “Put it on me, then.”

He carefully extracted the ring from the white satin crease and tried to slip it on my finger. It wouldn’t go past my second knuckle. “Uh-oh. I guess I should have picked a size eight.”

I laughed again. “It’s fine. We can go out this weekend to exchange it, right? I promise you, it’s the thought that counts.”

★ ★ ★

After we finished our wine and sushi, we went to the bedroom to fool around for a while, then put on our robes and came back out to have dessert. Gregory had gotten an amazing red velvet cake layered with vanilla cream and covered in chocolate ganache. We both had two huge slices, and afterward I was glad we’d gotten busy before dessert, because I was nearly too stuffed to move.

“Oof,” I said. “That cake feels a lot bigger than it looked.”

Gregory surveyed the tableau of dirty plates. “Well, I should attempt to clean this up before my sugar coma hits.”

I started to get up. “I can help you.”

He waved me off. “This was my gift to you. Not much of a gift if you have to do dishes at the end, right? And besides, it won’t take long.”

“Do you mind if I call my family to tell them the news?” I asked.

“I don’t mind at all.” He smiled at me. “Like I said, I want the whole world to know I love you.”

I got up, planted a kiss on the top of his head, and went to get my phone from my purse. On my way into the foyer, I realized that an itchy, stabby pain was building behind my eyes. I felt a little warm, too. Probably I’d had too much wine and the wine had too many sulfites in it. Oh, well. I took a couple of ibuprofen in the kitchen, then went into the bedroom to make my calls.

I had a moment of indecision. Who should I call first, my father or my sister? I didn’t have any other family left to tell. My long-gone grandparents were all only children, and so were my parents.

My mother died of pulmonary fibrosis when I was a junior at Northwestern and Claire was working on her MFA in fine arts at RIT. A long-haul complication of a stupid, random flu infection that just kept getting worse every year. Mom fronted that everything was fine, pretended that the steroids were working and she wasn’t slowly suffocating. My parents’ logic for hiding how sick she’d gotten? We kids needed to focus on college. Her dying was so *distracting*. They didn’t want me doing something that might endanger my future, like abandoning my classes in the middle of the semester so I could come home to be with her during her final weeks. And I’m sure it was also a matter of their own denial: If they admitted to us that she wasn’t long for the world … well, by default they had to admit it to themselves, didn’t they?

Claire and I both took her death pretty hard, and instead of pulling us together as a family, like you’d see in some heartwarming Hallmark Christmas movie, it created uncomfortable distances. We were upset with Dad that he’d kept the truth from us, and we both collapsed into depression and withdrew from each other. Claire

buried herself in her art and anger and made some brilliant pieces, but I mostly hid under the covers. Nearly flunked out.

The three of us still loved and cared about one another, but Mom's death hurt us all too much, I supposed, even after a decade. Time just hadn't done a very good job of healing the wounds. I hoped that maybe someday we'd all get back to a better place as a family.

Claire frequently opined that men all low-key suck as romantic partners and I should date women instead. But she seemed to like Gregory well enough anyway. So I decided to call her first.

But the phone went to her voice mail: *"Hey, this is Claire. I'm probably in the garage blowing glass, or Liz and I are out gardening. Leave a message."* In the background of the recording, I could hear one of her Yorkshire terriers yapping for attention.

"Hey, it's me," I said. "Got some great news … Gregory and I are going to get married whenever it's safe to have a ceremony. I hope you'd like to be in the wedding. Matron of honor? No pressure. But let's talk about it. Please call me back!"

I ended the call. Pain spiked behind my left eye, and my stomach churned sourly. Ugh, the sushi, wine, and cake were *not* sitting well. I got a bottle of Pepto from the linen closet, took a disgusting thick pink shot, and dialed my father in Leander, Texas. He still lived in the house Claire and I had grown up in. The house our mother died in.

"Hello, young'un!" It sounded like he was on the old landline in the kitchen; I could hear the white noise of the vent fan and the pop and crackle of something frying. "What's new with you?"

"Hey, Dad." I sat down on the bed. "I just wanted to tell you that Gregory and I are going to get married. He proposed this evening!"

"Well, that's fine news! I'm so pleased to—"

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by the panicky beeping of his smoke alarm. The screechy noise made my skull throb.

"Grease fire! Gotta go!" His shout felt like an ax in my forehead.

"Call Saturday?" I gasped.

"Yup. Love ya!" He hung up.

A sharp cramp hit me like a baseball bat in the gut.

“Shit!” I curled up on my side on the bed, hugging my knees, hoping the cramp would pass. It did not. The increasing pain made my eyes water. It felt like a glob of lava boiling in my stomach. The heat of it spread up my neck into my skull, making the pounding behind my eyes ten times worse. Tears rolled down my cheeks. My whole body broke out in a sweat and I started to shiver. Magma leaked out of my stomach, into my intestines. A searing bolus snaked through my gurgling bowels.

Oh Jesus. Bad fish? The sushi had seemed so fresh. Damn it. I sat up, shrugged out of my fluffy purple robe—no good in getting vomit or diarrhea all over it—and stumbled into the bathroom.

I flinched when I turned on the light and saw myself in the mirror. My face and chest had turned a bright, fevered red. My eyes were glassy, the whites deeply bloodshot, like I’d just smoked an entire bowl of Purple Haze. My blue irises had gone nearly white.

Another cramp made me double over and curse in pain. A tear dripped off my nose, onto the white tiles, and splattered red between my feet. Blood. I was crying *blood*. What the hell?

This isn’t food poisoning, a little voice warned in the back of my head. But I quickly pushed the thought away. No. I’d been so *careful*. It couldn’t be PVG.

Vomit rose in my throat. I barely had time to lunge for the toilet and fling the lid up before I hurled. Pepto-pink chunks splattered into the bowl as I gagged. Acidic rice stuck in my sinuses, burned. I broke out in a sweat again, and my trembling muscles felt like they were turning to overcooked noodles.

I groaned, swore, and barfed again. This time it was dark red. The cake, I guessed.

My vision was starting to blur, and it felt like all I could do to cling to the toilet. Shivering. Thank God we’d cleaned the bathroom a couple of days before so I wasn’t sitting naked in pee splatter and hair. And I hadn’t shit myself yet. Small mercies.

I heard Gregory step into the bathroom and cross the tiles.

“Honey, are you okay in here?” It sounded like he was a few feet behind me. “Oh, you poor thing! Do you want me to hold your hair?”

I nodded, moaning. He knelt beside me, gently gathered my sweaty brown hair at the nape of my neck, and pulled sticky strands away from my face.

“Thank you,” I tried to say, but instead I vomited copiously into the bowl. Red. So much red. As scarlet as the anniversary roses on the dining room table. I didn’t eat *that* much cake, did I?

Then I realized I was smelling iron.

Gregory froze beside me. “I think that’s blood. I think that’s a *lot* of blood.”

He dropped my hair, stood up. Backed away. “I—I’m going to get you some help.”

Please don’t go I’m so scared, I wanted to say, but I was throwing up again, purging the remains of the expensive anniversary dinner. Painfully bleeding out through my throat. Dying. I was sure of it.

The bathroom seemed to be spinning, and my vision was going dark at the edges. I was distantly aware of the hiss of a spray can, the medicinal smell of Lysol. Gregory urgently pleading with the 911 operator.

I lost consciousness right as I lost control of my bowels. So I have no idea what it was like, lying there helplessly in my congealing blood and sour filth on the cold tiles while my fiancé paced in the living room, waiting for the emergency squad.

It was the last mercy the universe would grant me for quite a while.

CHAPTER 1

“So how are you feeling today, Erin?” Dr. Shapiro’s pencil hovers over the CDC risk evaluation form clamped to her clipboard. Her expression is unreadable behind her disposable blue mask.

I fiddle with the elastic ear loops of the mask in my lap. “Pretty good, I guess.”

When I talk, I make sure my tongue stays tucked out of sight; I’ve learned to speak around it reasonably well. At least I no longer slur my words like I’m drunk. I smile at her in a way that I hope looks friendly and not like I’m baring my teeth. The exam room mirror reflects the back of the good doctor’s head. Part of me wishes the silvered glass were angled so I could check my expression; the rest of me is relieved that I can’t see myself.

Nothing existed before this. The present and recent past keep blurring together in my mind. Days and months both somehow seem like weeks in my memory. I’ve learned to take a moment before I reply to questions, speak a little more slowly to give myself the chance to sort things out before I utter something that might sound abnormal. My waking world seems to have been taken apart and put back together so that everything is just slightly off, the geometries of reality deranged.

“Are you able to sleep?” Dr. Shapiro shines a penlight in my eyes and nostrils and marks off a couple of boxes. Thankfully, she doesn’t ask to see my tongue. Bad enough I have to glimpse the thing in my bathroom mirror when I’m brushing my teeth. Revulsion and shame burn deep in my chest if I have to show it to anyone else. Even when

it's for strictly medical reasons, in front of someone who's probably seen fifteen far more grotesque things just that morning.

I got a brutal case of genital warts after I slept with Gregory for the first time. He was absolutely mortified, but there was nothing he could do. (Not-so-fun fact: There's still no routine human papillomavirus test for men. A guy can be collecting strains like they're Pokémons and have no idea he's about to give his new girlfriend warts or cancer or both.) One wart was this dime-size prickly thing that looked like a pink and gray table saw blade embedded in the opening of my vagina. Obviously I had to get the nasty thing cut out, but my company's new health plan didn't cover the gynecologist I'd been seeing for years. Going into the new doctor's office, which was entirely decorated with photos of adorable infants, felt like the worst, most embarrassing walk of shame I'd ever done in my life. That it cost $900 after insurance was just the cherry on the shit sundae.

My tongue is so much worse than that damned growth in every way … it's hard to even compare the two. (Although, yes, the tiny circular teeth growing inside its weird pores do remind me of the wart's spines.) And it's not going away, no matter how much green tea I drink or how conscientious I am about seeing my physician.

Dr. Shapiro asks me the same set of questions every week, straight off the CDC checklist. Surely, she's certainly got them all memorized by now, but she keeps her eyes on her clipboard unless I ask her a question. I'd have to be pretty far gone to answer badly and get myself sent back to the Greenlawn facility. The endless doctor visits wear down other Type Threes. Bleeding into a million vials. Peeing into thousands of cups. Pooping into hundreds of boxes. Dignity a thing of the past. But I hang on to the belief that someday there might be actual help for me here.

So I nod and tell her, "Yes. Sleep's not a problem. I have blackout curtains."

This is a desperate lie. Sleep is *always* a problem. Sometimes I lie awake the whole day in my bed, too exhausted to get up and

actually do anything but still aware of every dog barking and door slamming on my apartment block. *Especially* aware of every baby crying. My bedroom walls might as well be cardboard. I covered them in sound-dampening felt squares, but those only do so much. Part of my brain is always alert and restless no matter what I do. Hungry-predator gray matter I can't leash or satisfy.

I can't remember the last time I felt fully, authentically rested. But if I tell her this, she'll feel obligated to prescribe me yet another new drug that has yet another set of side effects. Anything that puts me down for the day is likely to make me oversleep my alarm. And even though I'm chronically ill, and chronically a danger to my community and myself, the world still expects people like me to make it to work on time. My rent, student loans, and medical bills won't pay themselves. Company shareholders need their European vacations. Be a productive member of the economy or die; it's the American way.

"So is the new job going well?" Dr. Shapiro asks.

"It's fine, too … They seem pretty happy with my work."

This, at least, isn't a *complete* lie. My most recent review was good. But it's certainly an enormous oversimplification. How can any supervisor be truly, authentically happy with the work of an employee they're afraid will infect them with a deadly disease? Or go on a murder rampage someday?

Human resources moved me off desktop support and put me on the graveyard shift in the company's cold network operations center. These nights, I'm mostly raising processes from the dead, watching endless scrolling green text on cryptic black screens. I'm pretty sure the company discreetly advised my coworkers Mareva and Jorge to carry Tasers and Mace just in case.

I'm positive that in any other scenario, they'd have terminated me while I was still in the hospital. Shipped my belongings to my apartment. But UCC lost a huge chunk of its workforce in the first waves of the pandemic. Especially in Bangalore and Hyderabad. Eighty percent of the world's e-commerce travels through the web

servers and mainframes in our data center. Tens of millions of dollars a day, billions a week. It's the fluorescent, buzzing carotid artery of the whole country's economy. They need people in that center monitoring, administering, and fixing systems 24/7/365, without fail. Thanks to the handful of IT certifications I got after I couldn't find a decent job with my environmental science degree, I'm one of the relative few qualified to keep the supply chains running and the currency flowing.

And I've convinced myself that it's good to be needed so badly that UCC is willing to overlook my many, many flaws as a white-collar employee.

One major flaw? My glitchy, slow memory. Thank God for operations manuals.

Most of my memories before the virus are as insubstantial as dreams; the strongest of them feel like borrowed clothing. The sweet snap of peas fresh from my garden. The crush of hot perfumed bodies against mine at the club and the thud of the bass from the huge speakers. The pleasant twin burns of the sun on my shoulders and the exertion in my legs as I pedal my bike up a mountainside.

The life I had in those memories is gone forever. I don't know why this is happening to humanity. To me. I'd like to think there's some greater purpose behind this disaster, some cosmic meaning in all this, but God help me, I just can't see it.

The worst memories? The bits and pieces I can recall of being desperately sick in the hospital. Puking up blood and wormlike bits of my stomach lining into a plastic emesis basin while ICU nurses watched from behind the clear plastic curtains they'd strung around my bed. My throat raw from acid. The unrelenting twisting agony in my guts. Cold sweats and aching muscles. Head pounding, everything in my vision warped with migraine auras. Unless I was coding, nobody was willing to come close enough to me to do so much as give me an encouraging pat on the shoulder or hold back my hair.

Delirium set in. After that, it's hard to know which of my memories are real and which were figments of my fevered brain. Some things were obvious nightmares. But they were so vivid, I recall them with the same clarity as I do anything else that happened in that time.

One recurring dream started out with me sitting in the beige waiting room of some doctor's office. Across from me sat my UCC acquaintance Mareva. She was wearing her typical outfit of jeans and a T-shirt under the tan cardigan she kept in the network ops center to ward off the air-conditioned cold. She wasn't wearing any makeup—I never saw her wear makeup in real life—and her brown hair was up in a messy bun. Beside her sat an attractive blonde woman in painful-looking stiletto heels, fishnets, and a strappy red nightclub dress that showcased her legs and cleavage. Her makeup was so stylized she almost looked like a drag queen. Within the dream, I'd known the blonde for a very long time but couldn't remember her name.

They both smiled at me, then gave each other knowing glances. The blonde took Mareva's hand in hers, holding it protectively on her lap.

"Are you two dating?" I asked.

"We're *expecting,*" Mareva replied solemnly.

"Oh." Somehow this news didn't surprise me, even though I knew Mareva had a complicated uterine tumor when she was younger and had to get a hysterectomy. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"It's a brand-new epoch," the blonde replied. "A new period, a new era. A new eon, probably. But we haven't any idea what we'll name it."

Mareva uttered a word in a language that sounded like black dwarf stars exploding before the heat death of the universe. Hearing it made me feel as if my brain was boiling inside my skull.

In the dream, the door from the waiting room opened into the exam area and I saw the blurry silhouette of a woman. "They say they're ready for the next patient."

"You go first," said the blonde.

I lurched up from my chair and staggered toward the door. But the dark floor wasn't carpet or vinyl planks but some kind of thick, sticky liquid. A tar pit trap. I was sinking.

I flailed, panicking. "Help me!"

The woman in the doorway stepped forward and grabbed my hand, pulling me free with her surprising strength.

I stood up on the now solid floor. We were no longer in a waiting room but were standing in the foyer of a dim motel room with cheap, thin carpeting. The blackout drapes at the other end of the room were drawn. Harsh sunlight leaked in around the edges.

The dark-eyed woman, who still gripped my hand, was in her late twenties. A little younger than me. Her thick chestnut hair was side shaved and tumbled over her left shoulder. She seemed familiar, but I couldn't place her.

"Do I know you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "You're not allowed to know me."

"What am I doing here?"

"You're leaving." She turned me around and pushed me toward the door, which was open to the empty sidewalk and sunlit parking lot beyond. "You're late for your appointment."

As I crossed the threshold, the concrete and pavement fell away. I plunged forward into a bright pale nothingness.

I plummeted, screaming … but then just as suddenly I sprouted wings that caught an updraft.

I was a raptor flying high above the heart of the city. The sun was dim behind brown smog clouds. The streets below me were abandoned, the blacktop thickly vined by strange twisted weeds and lovely crimson flowers. The blossoms resembled poppies, but I knew they were not of this earth. Sometimes, I spotted pregnant Mareva and the blonde down among the flowers, tending to them with watering cans. They'd see me in the sky and wave.

The air rushing over my face and wings stank of rotten meat and gasoline, and it took me a few wingbeats before I realized that the lawn of the downtown park was piled high with corpses. Someone

had tried to burn them, but cremating tons of human flesh took far more fuel than a few cans of gas. I circled over the corpses, and the bodies I saw were strange, faces distorted with tumors. Some people had grown extra arms or legs before they died. One bloated corpse looked more like a centipede.

I had variations of that dream at least six times, each version a little longer and more detailed than the last. They weren't nightmares while I was in them. I was soaring, my body painless and free, and the stink of festering flesh was no more disturbing than the delicate scent of cherry blossoms during a springtime stroll. The twisted, diseased bodies of the people who had died in abject misery were as pleasant to behold as nodding sunflower heads.

It was only after I awoke that the full horror of the dream hit me, and I wanted to scream and scream to purge the terrible images from my mind. But my acid-scorched vocal cords could only manage a strangled, thin wail. I'd end up grabbing blindly for the basin and dry heaving into it.

In my rare lucid moments during those awful weeks, I held on to the idea that if I could just survive, I could get well and go back to my regular life. Back to my cozy apartment and Gregory. Back to our plans to get married, find a house with a good space for a garden, and start a family. Back to having a future to look forward to.

I held on to that idea like it was a precious, magical, wish-granting coin I'd found in a pirate's treasure chest in a dream, only to find my fist empty when I awoke alone in a cold bed.

CHAPTER 2

“Are your hospitalization nightmares improving?” Dr. Shapiro asks.

“Maybe a little?” I’m momentarily relieved to not have to tell another lie. “They’re probably about the same, though.”

Everyone who’s been through what I’ve been through has nightmares about being in the hospital. You don’t survive all that without getting a case of PTSD. It’s funny, though, how she always asks how I’m dealing with my memories of the hospital but never about the high-security convalescent facility.

I don’t really remember being transported from the hospital to Greenlawn, which is actually a recommissioned insane asylum. I mean, nobody would call it that *now,* but that’s how city residents referred to it when it was built in 1908 on a few rolling acres outside the city. The official, original name was the Greenlawn Sanatorium and Asylum. Designed by an eccentric local architect named Lewis Castaigne, it was a huge old square brick building with barred windows that the city gradually swallowed. The asylum started to decline after World War II and was finally shut down in the early eighties. It stood empty for a while, became some kind of army training facility for a few years, and then was abandoned again.

Once the neighborhoods surrounding the maple-dotted hospital grounds had cycled through slums into gentrification, a revolving door of real estate investors hatched various plans to turn it into high-end lofts for investment bankers and cryptocurrency bros who wanted an edgier address. The latest owners had gotten so far as to modernize the HVAC system and deal with all the asbestos tile, lead

plumbing, and black mold poisoning the place. But then the pandemic landed and the need for secure recovery space was obvious. So the state declared eminent domain and took it. After some new coats of paint, new vinyl flooring, new medical equipment, and new heavy doors with electronic locks on the rooms, it was ready for the flood of patients.

The facility had been open for maybe a month (and I'd been there about a week) when my fever finally broke and I regained lucidity.

I remembered waking up slowly, groggily wondering why I couldn't move, why I couldn't reach up to rub the itchy crusts out of my eyes. My guts and head hurt, but *that* seemed perfectly normal. The longer my immobility lasted, the more frightened I was that I'd had a stroke. But I finally blinked my vision clear enough to see that white padded leather cuffs bound my wrists and ankles to the rails of a hospital bed. An IV dripped clear liquid into a needle in the crook of my left arm, and the clear tube of a Foley catheter trailed from beneath my white hospital gown, across my bare knee, down to a bag somewhere on the floor. My pee was the color of a slight sunburn. Probably not the healthiest shade, but I couldn't summon any fresh panic over it.

A few more blinks and my vision cleared further. The LED can lights above me were dimmed but still hurt my eyes. I craned my neck around to take in the thick, old-fashioned bars covering the safety glass windows, the heavy steel door, the bolted-down chair, the intercom speaker above the door. My relief at not being paralyzed evaporated as I realized I was more a prisoner than a patient. At least there was a Plexiglas-shielded flat-screen TV bolted way up in the corner of the room, although it had been turned off. People in jail didn't get their own TVs, did they?

There wasn't a nurse call button or TV remote, at least not where I could see. Certainly not anywhere I could reach.

"Hello?" I croaked. It was difficult to speak; my tongue felt swollen and stiff. The inside of my mouth was dry and sour, and my teeth

were fuzzy-slimy. I did *not* love the smell of my own breath inside my papery mask. Frankly, it stank like rats had died in my tonsils.

After a few minutes, it was clear that nobody had heard me, so I tried again, more loudly: “Hello? Is anyone there?”

The effort made my parched throat ache. But a moment later, the door lock buzzed and a young, cheerful nurse in royal blue scrubs, her glossy black-brown hair done in elegant short finger waves, came through the door. She wore a clear full-face shield and carried a tablet in a rugged black silicone case. I spotted the huge hornet-colored Taser clipped to a belt beneath the hem of her shirt before I noticed her name tag: A. TESFAYE, PMHN. Psychiatric mental health nurse.

“My name is Allegra, and I’m your nurse during the day shift this week.” She had a faint, lilting Caribbean accent. “So, how are we feeling today?”

“Okay?” I replied hoarsely. “Confused. Did I … do something wrong?”

I wiggled my hands in their restraints.

She smiled broadly, cautiously. Her teeth were very white, and I felt more self-conscious about mine. They were probably green. Mossy and gross. At least she couldn’t see them.

“Oh, not at all,” she said lightly. “All this is, you know, just precautions. Some people wake up, don’t know where they are, throw a punch or two. Agitated, you know? It just gets ugly, and nobody wants that to happen.”

I couldn’t help but notice that she was making no move whatsoever to undo my cuffs.

So I wiggled my fingers at her again. “How can I get out of these?”

“Well.” She stood at the foot of my bed and logged in to her tablet. “First, we need to make sure that you won’t get agitated. Do you know what your name is?”

“My name? Erin Holdaway.”

Nurse Tesfaye made an encouraging “Mm-hmm” and then proceeded to ask me where I lived, what year it was, who was president. I passed those with flying colors, apparently.

“Do you know where you are?” she asked.

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “If anyone told me, I don’t remember. This seems to be a hospital? But not the one I remember being in before.”

She nodded and marked something on her tablet. “It’s not the same. This is Greenlawn. The hospitals in the city are at full capacity, so we needed to find a place for people who are relatively stable, and the regular skilled nursing facilities aren’t equipped to properly care for patients like you. We are.”

My brain felt like it was stuck in mud. Every individual word she said to me made sense, but all together? Just a jumble of sounds. No connection to each other, no coherent meaning.

“Do you need me to repeat any of that?” she asked, not unkindly or impatiently.

“I got PVG?” I said, blinking, still trying to make sense of everything. But at least I’d grabbed hold of the most important detail. “No wonder I got so sick.”

I paused, dimly remembering the night I went to the ER. Gregory. Oh, no. What if he’d gotten sick, too? I shivered as I pictured him lying unconscious on the bathroom floor, too weak to crawl to his cell phone on the nightstand. Slowly bleeding to death with nobody to check on him.

“Gregory … my boyfr—fiancé … is he alright?”

“Yes, he’s just fine. I spoke with him this morning.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“He calls every day for updates on your condition. He’ll certainly be glad to know that you’re awake, because that means you’ll be going home to him soon.”

I wanted to call him right away, but I couldn’t remember whether my cell was with me when I went to the hospital. It wasn’t on the

orange plastic seat of the bolted-down chair, and I didn't see any other furniture where it could be sitting. "Where's my phone?"

"It's in a locker downstairs with your other personal items … Don't worry, we'll bring it to you soon."

I felt an unexpected, sharp spike of panic at not being able to talk to him. "When is soon?"

She smiled at me sympathetically. "I know you want to talk to your man, but Dr. Sallow thinks it's important that patients not have their phones for a while. Too easy to doom scroll, you know? Too easy to read some nonsense some hateful person wrote and let it poison your head."

"I guess that makes sense. Can't really hold up my end of a conversation right now, anyway." I felt helpless and out of touch without a screen and the internet to check on the world whenever I wanted. In the dim light, I suddenly felt a strong sense of disconnection, as if I'd shifted out of time and space into some strange bubble universe. "How long have I been out of it?"

"Well." She scrolled through whatever was open on her tablet. "It looks like you were in Cary Hospital for nine days total, and you've been here for seven days. So about sixteen days? You're doing better than many; some people been here since we opened and they still aren't scoring more than six points on the Glasgow Coma Scale."

I didn't really know what that meant, but I imagined it wasn't good. "I guess I'm lucky to be alive?"

The nurse gave me another wide, cautious smile. "Alive is always a good patient outcome!"

She cleared her throat. "So, I know that your stomach probably still hurts, but do you think you could try to eat some soft foods? It's part of the assessments we need to give you to figure out your future treatment plan."

The burst of words momentarily stunned my brain, but I sensed that agreeing was key to my getting untied. "Food? I mean … I might throw up again … but I guess I could try?"

“Wonderful! I’ll have the kitchen make a tray. But before I do that, I need to know if you have any known food allergies, intolerances, or restrictions? Like religious prohibitions against eating certain things?”

Too many words again, but “allergies or restrictions” stuck. “No, I don’t.”

“Great. Because you’re conscious now, I need to get you to sign some consent forms before we can proceed with any assessments or do any further treatments.”

I wiggled my fingers helplessly. “How am I supposed to—”

“Oh, the forms are all here on my tablet. I can hold it up so you can read, scroll it for you, and then you can sign with your finger.”

She brought up the first form and held her tablet a few inches in front of my face. Her hands were steady enough, but the tiny pixelated letters blurred in and out of focus.

“Let me know when you’re ready for me to scroll down,” she said cheerfully.

There was no way I could read any of this. And if I could read it, I wasn’t sure I could comprehend it. And even if I comprehended it now, would I remember what I’d read tomorrow? But if I didn’t sign, was I just going to be stuck in these cuffs forever?

“Okay, scroll, please,” I replied weakly.

She had me sign five different electronic forms and I hadn’t the slightest idea what was really on any of them.

“Looks like we’re all set.” She paged through the forms on her tablet, nodded to herself, and then gave me a bright smile. “I’ll be back soon with some food.”

She turned and left the room, the door thudding closed behind her. It certainly sounded like a prison door. My nose itched under my mask, and I vainly tried to scratch it by rubbing the side of my face on the thin pillow. The room was silent except for the cells of the pneumatic mattress periodically inflating or deflating to keep me from getting bedsores.

In the quiet, my mind started to focus.

★ ★ ★

The nurse returned with a whole entourage of people behind her. First, a young woman in pink scrubs pushed a meal cart into the room. She was twenty at most and wore her dishwater blonde hair up in a ponytail. Her scrunchie and Crocs matched her scrubs. A moment later, a huge bald orderly in orange scrubs, who looked like he could have worked as Jason Momoa's stunt double (with the aid of a wig and beard, anyway), opened the door and held it wide. A slightly built fiftysomething doctor in a white lab coat over black pants stepped through. My eyes were too blurry to read his name tag. Everyone but Tesfaye was wearing masks under their face shields, so I couldn't completely read their expressions. Pink scrubs's eyes were wide with worry, though.

"So I know this is a lot of people all at once," Nurse Tesfaye said, gesturing to the others broadly, then pointing individually. "This is Dr. Sallow, from pathology. He's here to speak with you about your diagnosis. This is Lisa, our nursing student. And this is Darius."

She didn't say anything more about why the huge man was there, but on the other hand, she didn't really need to.

"Okay," I said. Clearly, all this was going to happen whether I wanted it to or not.

Nurse Tesfaye came over to the left side of my bed and moved my IV pole back against the wall.

"I need to remove your IV," she said. "It might sting a bit when I take the tape off."

"Okay," I replied.

While she worked, Darius stepped up to the foot of my bed. "Alright, Miss Holdaway, after she's done, I'm going to undo your cuffs, starting with your legs."

"Looks like you're bleeding a little bit," Nurse Tesfaye said, after she pulled the plastic IV line out of my arm. She pressed a square of gauze against the tiny wound in the crook of my arm. It rapidly darkened with a dime-size spot of blood.

"Lisa, I need an extra hand," she called over her shoulder.

The young woman hesitated, her wary eyes shifting from me to the nurse.

“Lisa, *now,* please. And put on gloves.”

The young woman darted to the PPE dispenser by the door, grabbed a pair, then approached me, nervously pulling on the purple nitrile gloves.

“Just put your finger here and apply pressure while I get a Band-Aid, okay?” Nurse Tesfaye said. “Her blood can’t infect you if it’s not airborne—and if you remember to take your gloves off the way we taught you.”

Lisa stopped several feet away, reaching out as far as she could, on tiptoe, to do as she’d been told, pressing her index finger gingerly against the gauze. Nurse Tesfaye rolled her eyes, quickly unwrapped a sterile bandage strip, and applied it across my IV puncture.

“You might get scared,” Darius told me as he moved over to my right foot. “Sometimes people see or feel things that ain’t there. But I need you to stay calm and not move while I’m doing this, okay?”

Although he spoke softly, his deep voice still bore a threatening edge. This man would not hesitate to use force against me if he thought it was necessary.

“Yes, sir.” I lay limp as a rag doll as he methodically unbuckled the straps and cuffs and tucked the restraints somewhere under the mattress.

Once he was done, Nurse Tesfaye bent down behind the foot of the bed and came up with a wired controller.

“I’m going to raise the head of the bed so you can sit up to eat,” she said. “Just let me know if this gets uncomfortable, okay?”

“Okay.” I nodded.

The electric motor whined like mosquitoes as the bed slowly eased me up into a sitting position.

Dr. Sallow suddenly spoke to me in his brassy New Jersey accent: “Miss Holdaway, do you remember the night you went to the ER? If so, can you tell us about it?”

I blinked at him. “I think I remember most of it? My boyfriend Gregory got us sushi and a bottle of wine. Riesling. We were celebrating our fifth anniversary. He … he proposed to me. Got down on one knee and everything.”

Sadness suddenly overwhelmed me, and I had to blink back tears.

“Take your time if you need to.” Dr. Sallow glanced down at his smartwatch.

Nurse Tesfaye handed me a tissue.

Feeling embarrassed, I wiped my face and continued. “My head started to hurt after we had dessert. I took medicine, but it didn’t help. Then I started feeling hot, and I got sick. *Really* sick. It was all red. It just didn’t stop.”

I paused, remembering Gregory’s panic, how he dropped my hair and ran out of the bathroom. How alone and scared and abandoned I felt.

“What happened after that?” Dr. Sallow prompted.

“I’m not sure,” I lied. I didn’t want to talk about how one of the best evenings of my life had turned into the absolute worst night. “My memory’s kind of weird and mixed up after that.”

Dr. Sallow glanced down at his tablet and nodded. “You’ve been describing sudden-onset symptoms … Do you recall feeling ill in the days before?”

I shook my head. “Not really? But maybe a little? Could I have gotten infected by our dinner? Maybe by someone who handled our takeout?”

“No,” he replied. “Nobody’s seen any cases that had less than a twenty-four-hour incubation period. Most are in the forty-eight-to-seventy-two-hour range.”

Dr. Sallow glanced at the student nurse. “Let’s begin the diagnostic procedure. Go ahead and serve her lunch.”

Lisa pushed the lunch tray in place across my bed and lifted the beige plastic cloche covering it, revealing a bento of mushy hospital foods and liquids in Styrofoam containers. There were four-ounce

cups of a clear soda over ice, plain water, apple juice, and something red that I figured might be beet juice. My entrée items, such as they were, looked to be little bowls of applesauce, vanilla pudding, and a warm, grayish, lumpy mush that I assumed might be scrambled egg whites. They didn't smell like egg whites, though. I don't really like eggs, and it looked terrible, but the savory scent of it made my mouth water.

"Try the beverages first," Nurse Tesfaye said. "Go easy and let your body get used to the idea of drinking and eating again."

"And let us know how consuming the items make you feel," Dr. Sallow added. "Taste, appeal, emotional response … really, any reaction you feel at all."

I felt as though I'd been dropped into a focus group study for some new line of hospital cuisine. "Okay, if that's what you want?"

"It is," Dr. Sallow assured me. "I know it all seems strange, but these details are critical in determining your long-term prognosis. We can't determine your best course of treatment otherwise. So please be absolutely honest with us. We're not here to judge you in any way."

Why would I be judged for reacting to hospital food? Clearly, I was missing something, and that made me nervous. But all four of them were staring at me expectantly, so I reached out for the cup of water and took a sip. My hand and arm felt appallingly weak and shaky. I swished the sip of water around to rinse some of the sourness out of my mouth and swallowed. Waited a beat to see if my stomach would violently reject it, but aside from a slight cramp it felt okay.

"That seemed fine," I said. "Tepid. A little chlorine-y. Could use some ice."

I moved on to the clear soda. "7 Up? Sprite? Nice. Refreshing. Kind of a sickly aftertaste, but that could just be me."

The nurse tapped something into her tablet, and I drank the apple juice. "Tarter than I expected. Sweet. Maybe too sweet."

I reached for the cup of beet juice and lifted it to my lips. Instead of a sweet, earthy flavor, my taste buds were met with salt and iron.

The taste of raw meat. Surprised, I spat the sip back into the cup.

“What the hell is this?” I demanded.

“How do you feel?” Dr. Sallow’s voice was absolutely calm.

“Is … is this blood?” I stared down into the cup of crimson in my hands, recognition dawning as I spoke. “Did y’all serve me *blood*?”

I looked from the impassive doctor to Nurse Tesfaye, who gave me an apologetic nod and shrug.

“It’s pasteurized, and it’s part of the assessment,” she said calmly. “It can’t hurt you, and it’s necessary. Please try to trust the process.”

“Blood. Jesus Christ.” I set the cup back on the tray with a quivering hand, then leaned back into my pillow, giving them all a hard look.

Dr. Sallow blinked at me slowly, like a large cat. “Can you tell us how you feel?”

“Appalled? Grossed out? What do you want me to say?” I snapped, reaching for the water so I could rinse the gory residue off my tongue.

“Do you feel any different physically?” he asked.

“I feel creeped out.”

“Anything else?”

“No. I mean, what else am I supposed to feel about drinking blood?”

“You’re not necessarily supposed to feel anything at all,” he replied. “Please continue with the solid food.”

I stared down at the bowls in front of me. Especially at the mystery mush. And shook my head. “I do *not* trust y’all.”

“Miss Holdaway, please continue,” Nurse Tesfaye said. “I promise you on my mother’s name that nothing on that tray is physically or morally harmful. It’s all ethically sourced. I *promise*.”

“We really can’t leave until you do the thing,” Darius said, with sympathetic menace.

Later, as I tried to sleep that night, I would realize that her reference to ethical sourcing meant the blood was from a human

volunteer. Much later, I'd wonder what the hell they gave vegans during the test.

But in that moment, I glared at everyone and said, "Fine. Whatever."

Might as well get the most suspect thing on the tray over with, right? I picked up the plastic spoon and plunged it into the mystery mush. Angrily put the scoop of *whatever* into my mouth.

Its gelatinous, eggy texture sent little frissons of disgust down my spine. The flavor, though … I can't say that I objectively thought it was *good*. Savory, yes, but bitter. Imagine tofu that had transformed itself into meat without bothering to become muscle. I liked it, though. I liked it *a whole lot*. I liked it the way a person dying of thirst in the desert likes a cool bottle of water.

Before I realized what I was doing, I'd dropped the spoon, lifted the bowl to my lips and was slurping the mush out of it like a hungry dog. My heart was pounding like I was making a run for it across the hospital grounds.

"Ope, back up, fam," Darius drawled. "Looks like we got a Type Three up in here."

His remark didn't really register. Days later, I would have questions, and I wouldn't like the answers.

Dr. Sallow stayed perfectly still. "What do you think, Miss Holdaway?"

"I think this would be better raw." My stomach was growling with hunger, my arms shaking with adrenaline. "I think this would be better if there was *more*."

The bowl was empty. I'd licked it clean. I did want more, I wanted a *lot* more, and there wasn't any. Rage at its absence rose inside me like a wave.

I glared at Lisa, who flinched. "Give me another bowl. *Two* bowls."

"Unfortunately, she can't bring you more." Dr. Sallow's voice was very even, but I caught just a hint of a fearful tremor.

I looked up at him, really *looked* at him. His pupils were constricted to small, dark points. A single bead of sweat trickled from

his tidy gray hairline down his golf-tanned forehead. He was *afraid*. I knew it deep in my bones. A man is only afraid of a woman if she has *power*.

I slid my gaze to Darius. His face was an impassive mask behind his mask, but his fists were clenched at his sides. He was afraid, too.

And that realization made me feel absolutely exhilarated.

“One serving per day is all we can give each patient,” Dr. Sallow said. “But you can have as much pudding and applesauce as you like.”

“I don’t fucking *want* pudding or applesauce.” I stared at the good doctor’s head. His skull beneath that tidy professional haircut looked like a bowl. A bowl full of the mush my body and soul craved.

They only *thought* I was sick. They only *thought* I was weak. I imagined myself springing out of the bed, fast as a striking rattlesnake. I’d bash his skull against the steel doorframe and get to that creamy, expensively educated goodness inside. Get my licks in before Darius could put his thick hands on me. And then I’d do Darius, too.

“How about you give me what I want,” I growled, “or I’ll crack you open like a goddamned coconut, you smug motherfucker.”

I heard the swish of metal and plastic across fabric.

Nurse Tesfaye had drawn her Taser and leveled it at my chest. “Miss Holdaway, I think you’re getting agitated. I think you need to try to calm down.”

“What if I don’t *want* to calm down?” I stared at the shiny prongs of the Taser, trying to figure out if it would stop me or not.

“If you’re like some of our other patients, you probably feel like you can take on the whole world right now,” she said gently. “You’re probably feeling some urges. But I need you to realize that *this isn’t you*. This isn’t what you want to be, right?”

“I … I don’t know.” In the few seconds she’d been speaking, my desire to kill Dr. Sallow and Darius had ebbed, and in its wake I felt confused and shaky.

“I know you want to get back to your man Gregory,” she said. “He cares so much about you; I can hear it in his voice. He wants you to come home to him. But you can’t go home if you’re going to be agitated like this. And if you make me use this thing, it *will* hurt you. I know you don’t think so, but it will. If I have to use this thing, your recovery will be set back, maybe by a week, maybe longer.”

“That’d be bad, yeah.” The adrenaline rush had really taken a toll. I felt completely wrung out. Weaker than when I’d awakened. “What … what the hell was in that bowl? Drugs?”

“No drugs,” Dr. Sallow said evenly. “Just brains.”

“Brains?” I stared at him, a cold knot of horror forming in my belly. “Like … cow brains, right? Pork brains?”

He inclined his head, his eyes unreadable behind his face shield. “You received a diagnostic mixture of ninety percent bovine brain matter and ten percent tissue from harvested human cerebrums.”

“H-human?” I stammered. “Y’all turned me into a fucking *cannibal*? What kind of mad scientist bullshit are y’all into here?”

I must have looked like I was about to choose violence, because Nurse Tesfaye took a step closer with the Taser.

“Miss Erin, it’s not helpful to think that way,” she warned. “You have a condition that requires a special diet. That’s all this is.”

“But did you have to give me *human* brains?” My voice shook.

“We absolutely did,” she replied firmly. “It was the only way to know your Type for sure. The only way to know how to treat you from here on out.”

Sudden regret and existential misery flooded me. I started to weep, tears streaming hot down my face. “I wanna go home.”

“And we want to get you home,” she said. “All of us, we just want to see you get well. So will you trust us, and work with us? Be a good patient?”

“Yeah.” I sank back on the bed. “Yeah.”

And in the back of my diseased mind, a perversion of a children’s song echoed:

Brains, brains, the magical meat.
The worse you feel, the more you eat.
The more you eat, the more vicious you get.
Brain eaters are the worst kind of threat!

CHAPTER 3

“Are you having trouble staying awake during the day?” Dr. Shapiro asks.

“Not since I left Greenlawn.”

★ ★ ★

A few hours after my food test, Darius came into my room to take me outside for some fresh air while the janitorial team changed my linens and disinfected everything. My legs were still pretty weak, so he helped me into a transport chair, bundled me under a blanket, and wheeled me down the hall to the courtyard door.

“You feeling any better?” he asked as he backed my chair over the threshold. A cold March breeze ruffled my hair and blew down my neck. The hazy crescent moon was barely visible through scudding clouds.

“A little,” I replied.

He pivoted my chair around. The courtyard was square, maybe half the size of an Olympic pool, paved with dark slate and yellow ceramic tiles. There were just a few round, shaggy boxwoods in strips of dirt by the building’s walls and a pair of stone benches flanking a bone-dry concrete fountain. The basin and two tiers were shaped like stars.

The decorative paving stone pattern was … strange. Three large yellow arms arced and wound out from the fountain. The arms were too irregular, too dissimilar to be intended as decoration. I got the impression that if you looked at the pattern from the roof, it would

form some type of symbol. Maybe an Arabic character, or two characters joined as a glyph?

Whatever it was, something about the pattern made me uneasy.

Darius said, “Dr. Sallow wants me to get you used to walking a bit.”

He started to push me toward one of the benches, but suddenly a high-pitched alarm went off. A computerized female voice sounded through speakers I couldn’t see: “Staff alert. Code gray. Staff alert. Code gray.”

“Well, crap.” Darius scanned the windows that overlooked the courtyard, frowning. I was sitting too low to see whatever he spotted. “I hafta go help with that. Can you just chill here for a minute or three? Don’t try to get up, though. They’ll have my ass for breakfast if you fall and I ain’t here.”

I nodded. “I’ll stay put.”

“Thanks.” He jogged back to the door and went through. I heard the lock latch when it closed behind him.

I shivered and drew the blanket tighter around my shoulders. Spread it out a bit across my thighs. It felt like it was freezing out here, but my breath wasn’t even steaming. So it wasn’t any lower than 46 degrees. Of course, I’d lost most of my insulation in the hospital.

The strange yellow paving stone design caught my eye again. What could it possibly represent?

As I studied the curves and angles, my shivering intensified, and my vision began to blur. I felt myself pitch backward, into darkness. I flailed blindly for a heart-stopping moment, but then wind caught my arms. Not arms. Wings.

Once again, I was a raptor soaring high in the afternoon sky somewhere to the northwest, skimming over the rocky hills that overlooked the valley-nestled city. I saw an old, stately manor set back on a gray limestone cliff. The house had a black slate roof and a crenellated stone tower that reminded me of a medieval castle. Lovely gardens and twin hedge mazes spread on either side of it.

Far behind the building was a broad red barn, and beyond it on a gentle slope, a glittering field of dark glass solar panels.

I'd never seen the manor before, but I knew it was filled with priceless rarities. Far more than mere money could acquire. A keep fit for a king. Or a living god.

Suddenly, an invisible chain yanked me straight down out of the sky, and I was plummeting—

I jerked awake in the chilly transport chair. Darius looming over me, his panicked scowl melting into an expression of relief.

"Oh, thank the Man Upstairs, for a sec I thought I lost you." He straightened up and ran his huge hands over his shaved scalp.

"Lost me?" I blinked at him in confusion.

"I came back out … you was slumped over. Lookin' real dead. I know I'm not supposed to say so, but I seen dead people before, and … yeah." He swallowed. "I couldn't find your pulse. I thought you stroked out or had a heart attack or somethin'. I was 'bout ready to put you on the ground and bust out the paddles."

He nodded to the white emergency defibrillator kit bolted to the wall by the door.

"I feel okay," I offered. "I mean, I *think* I do. I just … had a dream, I guess?"

He frowned down at me, concerned. "Like a nightmare? Scary?"

"No, it was nice." I paused. Already the details were fading away. "I was flying."

"See, I *swear* you did not look asleep. I guess it could've been a seizure? Sometimes people stop breathing and they see things." He grimaced, looking over his shoulder at the strange tile design. "This place creeps me out. That weird yellow thing and shit. I do *not* know why the doc wanted me to take you out here and not out front where there's grass. It'd be safer there."

"Yeah, what's up with that symbol? Do you know?"

He shrugged. "I guess the architect had it put in. Some dude named Castle or Stayne or something. Dunno why. But I guess he was famous back then, and they let him do what he wanted. And

now it's so old it's historical, so nobody will paint it over or tear it out. Oh well." He moved behind my chair and wheeled me around. "Let's get you back inside. I'll get the night resident to give you a good look-over to make sure your heart's not about to pop."

"Much appreciated, thanks."

CHAPTER 4

“Is the daily health app on your phone still working well for you?” Dr. Shapiro asks.

“As well as ever,” I reply. Not a lie, but I also know she won’t interpret my words in the spirit they’re intended.

★ ★ ★

My heart was fine. I finally got my phone back for limited use, three long days after that damnable food test. By then they’d taken out my catheter and given me a commode chair, a recliner, and some old magazines to read, along with the TV remote, although the only channels I got were the weather and Bob Ross reruns. I got better clothes, too, after Gregory made a late-night delivery downstairs: my own pajamas, underwear, and socks instead of the flimsy hospital gown and papery disposable panties.

Nurse Tesfaye and Lisa wheeled my lunch tray in, and my mood soared when I saw my iPhone lying on the paper napkin.

“I made sure to charge it up to one hundred percent for you.” Nurse Tesfaye beamed at me.

“Thanks.” I picked up the phone … and realized it was unlocked. I *always* lock my phone. Years at UCC had drilled data security into my head, and I was careful with my personal devices.

I looked at Nurse Tesfaye. “This didn’t ask for my passcode. It should have.”

Her smile faded. “Right.”

She paused, seeming to consider whether to tell me the truth or not. “We … we have to turn patients’ phones over to Homeland Security.”

Lisa took that as her cue to quietly abandon the lunch cart and leave the room. Nurse Tesfaye didn’t call her back.

“Homeland Security?” When did Homeland Security get involved in the pandemic? I suddenly felt sick to my stomach. Anxious and furious. I wanted to let loose a whole string of curses, but I knew that acting *agitated* would land me more time in the facility.

So I took a deep breath and held it for three beats before I replied. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t consent to a digital search. Why were they in my phone?”

She looked deeply uncomfortable. “While you were in the hospital, Congress passed an emergency law that affects people infected, or thought to be infected, with PVG. The Pandemic Security Act. It suspends HIPAA requirements when it comes to state and local authorities managing infection threats, contact tracing and notifications, and things like that.”

My brain churned. It took me a moment to remember exactly why what she’d said didn’t sound right. “But unwarranted digital searches aren’t prevented by HIPAA. That’s a Fourth Amendment protection.”

I only knew that because I’d had a coworker who was a digital rights activist and a chatterbox. A law school washout with ADHD. He hadn’t lasted that long at UCC because he started trying to get us to unionize. But while he was there, I learned a surprising amount from him, and the vast majority of it was even accurate.

Nurse Tesfaye put her hand over her heart. “Look, I’m not an expert on that-all. I never touched your phone except to charge it for you. You’ll learn all about how the new law affects you on your discharge day.”

My heart was pounding loud in my ears. She hadn’t said so, but it sounded like some enterprising political cabal had used panic over the pandemic as an opportunity to turn civil rights into civil privileges … and I had lost some of mine.

“But why were they looking at my phone?”

She winced. “I don’t really know? Contact tracing is what they said.”

“Uh-huh.” Homeland Security could have simply demanded my phone’s location data from my cell carrier. They only needed my phone if they wanted to dig around in my data … or plant software of their own.

I brought up my home screen, and sure enough … right there at the top of my apps was a new HEALTH CHECK-IN icon in cheerful, patriotic red, white, and blue.

“What’s this?” I held my screen toward her and pointed at the app.

She looked utterly unsurprised. “Right. That. You’ll learn more on your D-Day, but … that’s for logging your daily symptoms. It’s so your care team can quickly identify if you’re in crisis. They installed it as a convenience for you.”

“A convenience.” I tried not to show the incandescent rage I felt. I’d saved up for months for my shiny, brand-new iPhone. It was the first really nice thing I’d owned in a long time. An electronic treat of the highest order, and nobody but me had ever owned it. I’d loved it as much as my sister, Claire, loved her tiny yappy dogs.

And now it was tainted. Unsafe. I wondered how Nurse Tesfaye would feel if some creepy man came into her home while she slept and groped through all her underthings. Sniffed the fabric that had touched her most personal parts. Rearranged her lingerie as a “convenience.” But I knew that if I asked her that, she’d think I sounded *agitated*.

“That’s *great,*” I told her.

I knew that, from then on, I’d have to treat my phone as my own personal digital spy. Not that it hadn’t been before. Maybe I should have been more worried, but it always seemed to me that Corporate America’s attempts to get me to be a good little consumer were straightforward. They weren’t there to judge anyone for their needs or desires. They just wanted people to buy their stuff. Probably it was junk you didn’t need, probably it was plastic crap that was slowly

destroying the planet. And yeah, they'd prey on your personal insecurities to do it … but even the friendly neighborhood Avon ladies back in my great-grandmother's day did that, too.

This new invasion of privacy, though? It felt a whole lot more personal. The stakes might be *much* higher than me getting myself into debt—more than college and my hospital stay already had, anyway—and ruining my credit score. Who the hell knew what was in store for me if my "care team" decided I was having a crisis?

I must have had quite a dismayed look on my face, because Nurse Tesfaye said apologetically, "I know this all seems sneaky, but it's for your own safety. The law says they have to treat all the patients the same at first, and some folk leave here not knowing how to tie their shoes. Expecting them to go through all the steps of downloading a new app is just too much. It's easier on everyone this way."

I tried not to argue, but I couldn't quite stop myself. "If they don't remember how to tie their shoes, how do you expect them to follow directions?"

"If you don't respond to the on-screen prompts, it switches to voice prompts and records what you say to it. It also prompts you automatically if you haven't checked in that day."

"Voice recordings … that's a *lot* of data. More than some people can afford. And what about patients who don't have a smartphone?"

"They'll go over that on your D-Day." She looked and sounded exhausted, as if this whole conversation was draining away her will to live. I almost felt sorry for her.

"But the short of it is," she continued, "any patient who can't afford the tech gets it for free. But you have a good job still waiting for you, I think?"

"Yes. As far as I know." I glanced down at the phone in my hand and suppressed the urge to hurl it against the whitewashed cinder-block wall. It might be a spy, but I still needed it. It was my only connection to the outside world.

"I guess I should eat lunch, and then call my boyfriend."

She looked profoundly relieved that an escape hatch had finally opened in the conversation. “Right. I’ll step out for a bit and give you some privacy.”

Privacy. I’m still proud of myself that I didn’t break into bitter hyena laughter when she said that. “Thanks. You’re the best.”

CHAPTER 5

“How are things going with your boyfriend? Gregory? Or is it Greg?” Dr. Shapiro asks.

Her question hits me like a stomach cramp, and it’s hard to reply. I should have expected it. And it’s a bit of a trick: she already knows his name is Gregory. He never liked people shortening it, because his jerk cousin was named Greg. She’s testing my memory.

“Gregory. And it’s … going … as well as it can?” I can’t keep a stressed quiver out of my voice. “Long-distance relationships are hard.”

She nods sympathetically. “They are.”

★ ★ ★

I ate my lunch—taking time to savor my too-small bowl of what I’d come to learn were lightly poached cow brains—and then I texted Gregory.

> I just got my phone back! You have time to video chat? I miss yr face.

Three promising dots appeared and pulsed for a few seconds.

Honey! Im so glad. I can take a break. Call u in 5 minutes?

Sure, I typed back.

I spent the next few minutes using the selfie camera on the phone as a mirror, attempting to make myself somewhat presentable. I had

a bad case of bedhead and only a rubber comb to deal with it. No makeup to cover the deep circles under my eyes. There's fashionably thin and then there's hospital gaunt. I was gaunt. My complexion wasn't close to rosy. But I did my best.

The video call came through, and I touched the green camera icon to accept it.

"Sweetie!" Gregory exclaimed. Smiling, sun on his face. I could see he was sitting outside under a tree. Probably in the company courtyard, where there was still a decent wireless signal. He didn't like burning his cell data if he didn't have to. "It's so great to see you. How are you feeling?"

Boy, that was a loaded question, wasn't it?

"I'm doing okay," I replied. "My fever's gone, but I still get headaches. You can probably see I lost a ton of weight. There have been some other … changes, you could say."

He nodded, his smile fading. "Your nurse said you're on a pretty restricted diet. I guess you'll be on it awhile?"

"Yeah." I sighed. "The virus wrecked my guts. If I'm lucky, it'll get better over time. Nobody knows how long it might be, though."

"She said you can eat bland foods like bananas, rice, applesauce, tapioca, saltines?"

"Yeah. I got lucky compared to some. I can still handle a little bit of dairy and egg whites, too. But my stomach can't deal with muscle meat anymore, apparently. Or anything with a lot of fiber or acid. An orange and a roast beef sandwich would make me barf for days. And I guess my body isn't making certain proteins anymore. I need special easy-to-digest supplements now."

Gregory's face shifted to the very neutral expression he puts on when he's freaked out but doesn't want to show it.

"What kind of supplements?" he asked. "Did they tell you yet?"

I didn't want to mention my daily bowl of brains. It's a hell of a thing to have to eat every day. But I wasn't surprised when I found out they were my new favorite food. I knew exactly what I wanted the moment I started thinking about attacking Dr. Sallow and Darius.

“I mean, not really?” I hedged. “I guess they’re letting me know things a little at a time so I don’t get overwhelmed. Glycine and proline for sure, though. The nurse told me they put that in the pudding.”

“Yeah.” He bit his lip uncertainly. “Your nurse told me that I shouldn’t discuss anything that they haven’t covered with you yet. But it’s hard to know what you don’t know.”

“And it’s not like this frustrates *me* at all,” I replied, unable to keep a bitter edge out of my voice. “This whole thing of not knowing basic facts about myself when my entire career has centered on knowledge.”

“I know. It would drive me crazy, too.” He sounded sympathetic, and looked worried. “I’ve been reading up on the virus a whole lot the past two weeks. Kinda obsessively, if I’m honest. I *want* to fill you in. There’s a lot of logistical stuff we need to talk about. But your nurse … she was very clear and very firm that I not do that. I guess we have to just trust the process, right?”

“I guess so.” I paused. “So how have you been?”

“Me? I’m fine. They gave me a fast antigen test at the ER after I followed the squad there, and I got another test ten days later. Both came back negative. I didn’t catch the virus from you. I’m clean.”

His comment made me unreasonably angry and I tried hard to tamp down my sudden rage. But I didn’t succeed. “Clean. Like how you told me you tested clean of sexually transmitted diseases, except, *whoops,* you totally weren’t?”

He looked shocked. “Whoa, whoa, this isn’t like that—”

“Why not?” I shot back. “Viruses are viruses. Tests are fallible. For all either of us really knows, *I* caught this virus from *you*. Remember all those asymptomatic carriers during the coronavirus years? We don’t know that’s not you.”

His face blanched, and he set his lips in a thin, determined line. “No. I *don’t* have it. They were clear on that. I didn’t make this terrible thing happen to you.”

“That’s great. That’s wonderful.” I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. He and I shared everything: kisses, glasses, towels, passwords. Regardless of how the virus was transmitted, it seemed impossible that I could be infected and he wasn’t. But on the other hand, that didn’t really matter, did it?

“Look, honey, I’m sorry I snapped at you,” I said. “I haven’t … I haven’t been myself lately.”

His expression relaxed. “I know. I’m sorry, too. I know you’ve been through a whole lot. More than I can really imagine. And I want you to know that I love you, and I’ve got your back. I called UCC’s HR department and made sure that your short-term disability was all set. You don’t have to worry about that. They said to just focus on getting well and they’ll have a place for you when you’re ready. I’ve been taking care of business while you’ve been gone. Cleaned up your garden, too.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “I appreciate it. I appreciate *you*. I love you.”

He smiled at me, but then his face clouded. “There’s … there’s something else I need to tell you. I don’t know that now’s a good time, but there probably isn’t gonna be a really good time for it. And you deserve to know.”

My stomach dropped. “What’s happened?”

“I talked to your sister the morning after you went to the ER and let her know what was going on. I phoned her back every few days to give her updates, but then my calls started going straight to voice mail. A few days ago, I got a call from Liz. She told me your father and your sister have both passed on.”

He’d phrased everything so euphemistically and buried the lede so thoroughly that the meaning of his words didn’t register right away. “Passed on? As in *dead*?”

He nodded uncomfortably. “Yes. I’m so sorry.”

“What happened?” My brain jumped to the obvious conclusion. “Was it the virus?”

“Your sister got sick, yeah. Your father had an accident like two days after you landed in the ER. Broke his neck falling off his roof. Looked like he was cleaning his gutters. Claire went down to deal with his cremation and the estate, and I guess she got infected on the trip. Liz said it just took her apart at the seams. She bled out in the ICU forty-eight hours after they admitted her.”

“Jesus.” My family was dead. *Gone.* Everyone I loved was gone. Everyone but Gregory. He was the only person left in the world who gave a damn whether I lived or died.

And I was pretty sure I hadn’t told my dad or Claire that I loved them when I spoke to them last. God, I was such a jerk.

Before I knew it, I was sobbing.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” Gregory said. “I wish I could be there to give you a hug.”

“I wish I could hug you, too,” I wept. “But I’m glad you’re not here. This place really sucks.”

“I’m so sorry,” he repeated.

“Me, too.”

★ ★ ★

I thought, afterward, that my next conversation with Gregory would *have* to be a whole lot cheerier. I’d be coming home. We’d be making big plans to get on with our lives.

But the following day, Dr. Sallow decided I was recovered enough—meaning mentally stable enough—to get tied to the tracks of the hard facts freight train. And he filled in all those frustrating gaps in my knowledge like Montresor relentlessly stacking bricks in Fortunato’s wall. Afterward, Nurse Tesfaye offered to let me call Gregory, but I opted to sit there watching Bob Ross paint soothing landscapes and talk about happy accidents for six hours instead.

The next morning, I pulled on my big girl pants and asked her for my phone.

★ ★ ★

“Hey, honey.” Gregory’s expression was somber. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay, physically. Lousy otherwise.” I paused, wondering if I should just rip off the proverbial Band-Aid. “I guess you probably talked to Dr. Sallow?”

“Some, yeah. He said you’ll be well enough to leave next week, which is good…” He trailed off.

“But I guess he told you about my blood test?” My most recent virus titer showed that viral activity in my bloodstream was *increasing,* not decreasing, meaning I was still significantly contagious and more likely to experience chronic problems because of my infection.

“Yeah.” Gregory looked grim. “He told me. I already bought some blackout curtains, and I’ll get those hung up before you come home.”

Most people weren’t in my situation. They got the virus, and maybe it gave them a bit of a headache and some nausea, but after a few days’ bed rest they were going out for Thai again. They never went to see their doctor, much less an ER. Congratulations to them! They’re Type Ones, and unless they need to get tested, they probably don’t even know it.

But some were like me. Their headache turned into the worst they’d ever had, and they started vomiting up blood and then their stomach lining. The least unfortunate ones were able to get to an ER for lifesaving treatment. But if they left the hospital in anything other than a body bag, many of them had lost the ability to digest most foods and to make certain proteins.

And in the absence of those proteins, Dr. Sallow had explained, my body would have trouble healing itself. If I were still a kid, normal growth would be a problem. Even worse, the enzymes my DNA uses to repair itself didn’t work very well anymore.

Sunlight was no longer my friend. Which explained why they’d never taken me outside during the day for any recreational activities. X-rays were trouble, too, so trips to the dentist were going to get tricky.

I wasn't a smoker or much of a drinker, which meant I was less likely to suffer from DNA damage. But even if I quit eating junky, carcinogen-laden processed foods and covered up like I was trekking across the Andes, I could look forward to my skin cracking and my body sprouting tumors. If I was particularly unlucky, I'd turn into a total cancer farm by my thirty-fifth birthday.

As for our plan to start a family? Pregnancy was off the table. My chance of giving birth to a healthy baby with ten fingers and ten toes was almost nonexistent. The luckiest women who got infected during or before their pregnancies miscarried early.

And there was my brain. Sooner or later, malfunctioning DNA repair meant my brain would degenerate. I was already extremely worried about that.

"So, are you a Type Two?" Dread and hope were both clear in Gregory's expression.

Even that early in the pandemic, doctors had discovered that if a patient survived all that pain and vomiting, the symptoms of their chronic disease *could* be controlled, if they were given daily supplements of certain vitamins and amino acids.

If your best natural source for all that is fresh human blood, congratulations! You are a Type Two! It's ghoulish and expensive, but fortunately fresh animal blood is nearly as good as human juice. Pasteurized animal blood? Much safer, less effective, but still works well enough to keep you calm and alert enough to work an average white-collar job.

If, however, the best source for you is a nice fresh bowl of raw brains … you are a Type Three. Much more ghoulish, much more expensive. And you are *much* more prone to rages and violent psychotic episodes if you don't get what you need.

"I'm a Type Three," I told Gregory.

His face went utterly slack for a moment as the bad news settled in his mind. Nobody was going to let a Type Three spend time around a young child unless they were not so secretly hoping the child would die. So adoption and fostering were off the table, too.

Even owning dogs was probably a terrible idea. Our plan for a family was thoroughly, absolutely shot.

“Oh, shit,” he finally said.

“I’m a *contagious* Type Three. They might be able to fix the contagious part in a few months with antivirals. Or maybe we’ll get lucky with one of the RNA vaccines they’ve fast-tracked. But the rest? Yeah. *Oh, shit.*”

I paused, inhaling deeply. Gregory had read much more than I’d been told, so he probably knew in far more detail how disastrous the situation was. He surely knew what needed to happen next, and I didn’t want to make him feel like the bad guy by his having to be the one to say it out loud.

“We can’t live together after this,” I blurted. “It’s not safe for you. I don’t know how I can afford my own place, or who would rent to me, but I’ll have to find something fast—”

“Please, keep the apartment. You’re not well enough to deal with a move. I’m pretty sure the landlord will be cool with it. I’ll make sure he’s cool with it. We’re on a two-year lease anyhow and I don’t think he can break it without cause. As for me … I can just stay with my brother for a while.”

“Move in with Joey?” I was legitimately shocked at his suggestion. “But he’s such a … a *slob*.”

I was being polite. Joey was more than a slob. He was a *pig*. Boorish, chauvinistic, more than a little sadistic. He was intelligent—he had a lucrative job as a senior programmer—and could be incredibly charming and put-together when it suited him. I’m sure all his bosses were impressed with him and thought he was a stand-up guy. He *knew* how to clean up and behave. But he loved being a bully. His abusive behavior had cost him his marriage, but the expensive divorce hadn’t been the wake-up call Gregory hoped it would be.

I absolutely cringed at the thought of *anyone* living with Joey, much less someone I loved and cared about.

“I know it’s not ideal,” he replied. “But he’s got a huge place in Upper Darington, and since his wife and kids moved out, I know he has plenty of room.”

“I guess if the house is big enough, you won’t have to deal with him and his mess that much?”

He laughed nervously. “Better the devil you know, right? I spent sixteen years living with the guy … what’s a couple more months? Let’s keep a good thought: If things go well, this is just temporary. I’ll be able to move back in after they have vaccines and better treatments. I mean, so many people are affected, they *have* to come up with that stuff, right?”

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s keep a good thought.”

CHAPTER 6

Dr. Shapiro turns to her computer and scrolls through my file. “I see that during your discharge from Greenlawn, the counselor recommended you for an IUD. But you haven’t gotten one yet?”

I shift uncomfortably on the exam table. I’d really hoped this topic wouldn’t come up. “No, I don’t have one. Could … could we put that off? I mean … it’s not like I see anyone. Gregory can’t get me pregnant when he’s fifteen miles away.”

“I don’t honestly see a medical need for one,” she says. “So, yes, I think we can put that off if that’s your choice.”

“It is,” I say. “Thanks.”

★ ★ ★

On my discharge day—my D-Day—Nurse Tesfaye brought me my street clothes and a bag of my things she’d kept in my downstairs locker. Shortly after I got dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that hung huge on my body, a short redheaded counselor from Homeland Security came to my room, decked out with a face shield, black N95 mask, black nitrile gloves, and a Taser. She was there to tell me what my new normal was going to look like in the wake of the Pandemic Security Act. I didn’t have much experience dealing with counselors or cops, but it seemed to me that she carried herself more like a cop. She certainly dressed more like one.

“My name is Candy Kleypas and I am here to be very honest with you about your situation.” She pronounced it *sitch-ee-AY-shun*. A

southerner. Maybe from somewhere near Atlanta? My ears were pretty blunt from years of living in the Midwest.

She tugged down the hem of her black polo shirt under her bulletproof HOMELAND SECURITY tactical vest. “You have been diagnosed with Type Three Post-PVG Syndrome and that is *not* a good thing. It ain’t good for you, it ain’t good for your neighbors, it ain’t good for your family.”

I wanted to make a darkly sarcastic remark about not having any family left to endanger, but I figured that smarting off wouldn’t help my cause much. So I just nodded.

“The news—which I know you probably ain’t seen in a while—has widely publicized incidents in which other Type Threes have committed murder, assault, and even acts of cannibalism. One woman ate her dang baby on national TV. As far as the public is concerned, all y’all are a bunch of menaces. Our statistics back that up. The average Type Three has a fifteen percent chance of committing a violent criminal act after release.”

Fifteen percent? I thought. *That’s your idea of backing it up?*

In college, I’d volunteered as a shuttle driver to help female students reach their dorms safely after dark. As part of that job, I’d learned a lot about both sexual assault and domestic violence. The average woman has about a 29 percent chance of being beaten, burned, strangled, or sexually assaulted by an intimate partner sometime during her lifetime. And the situation is even worse on college campuses: 43 percent of women students have had violent or abusive partners.

As much as I dearly wanted to remind her of the statistics and ask her if the average Type Three was *actually* proven to be more inherently dangerous than a frat boy with rage, alcohol, and entitlement issues, I did want to leave Greenlawn that day. I wanted that *way* more than I wanted her to acknowledge how messed up the situation looked from my perspective.

So I simply nodded again.

“Those violent, often unspeakable criminal acts are what drove our lawmakers to create the Pandemic Security Act.” That line sounded like part of a practiced speech; even her accent had shifted to something more Middle American.

She handed me a thick folder of papers. “Here’s a copy of all the new regulations.”

“Thanks.” I tried to keep my voice neutral.

“But the first thing is that because you’re contagious, you need to drastically limit your contact with other people. The virus is in your blood, saliva, urine, sweat, and other bodily fluids, and it can stay active awhile on surfaces. Be mindful of that.”

I nodded. “Dr. Sallow and Nurse Tesfaye already told me how I can accidentally infect people.”

“Good. The second thing is, we cain’t do this by the honor system. This isn’t like the flu or coronavirus or something.” Her tone made me think that she was one of the people who thought COVID-19 had been overblown. “This is *serious*. Every Type Two or Type Three must stay in contact with their care teams. In many states, Twos and Threes must get ankle monitors from SCRAM Systems within twenty-four hours of being released from a care facility. Here, that only happens after a citation for noncompliance.”

Ankle monitors? They sure were doubling down on making the chronically ill feel like criminals. At least I wouldn’t have to wear one unless I got myself in trouble.

She continued: “You *are* required to have our Health Check-In app running at all possible times. Dr. Sallow says our techs have already installed the app?”

“Yes.” I pulled my iPhone out of my jeans pocket to show her.

She nodded approvingly. “Check in to report your symptoms each day. Your phone will prompt you. If it’s been more than twenty-four hours, you’ll hear an alarm. If your phone is off the network for more than four hours, or if it’s been more than thirty-six hours since you checked in, your care team will call an agent to check on your welfare.”

“What if I need to go someplace where there isn’t any cell coverage?”

“We discourage that,” she replied. “But if it’s absolutely necessary, let your care team know in advance.”

“What if my battery dies?”

“Then you best get it charged up again.” Her expression hadn’t changed, but she sounded impatient. “Get an external battery and an extra charging cable and keep it in your car. Any questions about that?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Use your phone as normal.” Her voice had shifted again; I suspected this was more of the canned speech she gave everyone. “We will monitor your use of dating apps and social media. Meeting strangers for sex is a high-risk activity and is prohibited. You can continue preexisting relationships, but your partners will be subject to testing and quarantine under the PSA. You are absolutely forbidden from having *any* sort of close physical contact with Type Twos or other Type Threes.”

I blinked at her. “But why? If we’re already all infected, what’s the problem?”

“There’s concern about mutations. The virus is doing some real weird things and we don’t want that bear poked.”

“Okay…” That didn’t sound like anything based in real science, but what did I know? I could look it up later.

“As the final and most important part of thing two, you will need to meet with your care team physician on a monthly basis. There is no cost to you for these appointments. If you are too ill to get to the doctor’s office, do a telehealth visit through our app instead.”

Kleypas reached into a pocket of her vest and pulled out a white business card. “You’ve been assigned to see Dr. Astrid Shapiro. She’s your care team lead. You can contact her by phone or through the app.”

I took the card and read it. The doctor’s office was very close to our apartment; I could walk there if I needed to. At least that was

something.

“Y’all are *not* allowed to go out in crowded public areas. If you can look around and see more than ten people? You ain’t supposed to be there. Gyms are off-limits regardless, because nobody wants to touch your sweat. You are not allowed to go within a thousand feet of occupied playgrounds, day care centers, K12 schools. Cain’t go to churches, neither. Which, if you ask me, is a real shame, ’cause all y’all need Jesus.”

I bit my lip. While I wanted to make the sarcastic remark that what we actually needed was a freakin’ vaccine, I was also thinking, *Wouldn’t Jesus be* nice, *though?*

Wouldn’t it be great to be absolutely certain that Jesus—or someone like him—was real? To pray and know, deep in your heart, that you were forging an eternal, intimate relationship with the endlessly loving, endlessly forgiving, tender and merciful son of God? To know that if you repented your earthly mistakes and took him into your heart, he would make sure that everything worked out okay in the end? That even if you suffered and died, he would take you into his strong, gentle arms and you would live on and on in his love and understanding? That you were a part of a great and wonderful thing, and your life on this earth among billions of other souls served a unique, divine purpose?

Wouldn’t that kind of faith, that kind of certainty, be such an incredible comfort to someone in my situation? Wouldn’t it be such a *relief* to just let Jesus take the wheel?

It sounded really, really great. But I knew that, like all other things that seemed far too good to be true, Jesus was mostly a comforting myth. That whole “God works in mysterious ways” thing felt like a bunch of hand waving.

I wasn’t an atheist, though. What did I know about souls? There *could* be a god out there, somewhere. Maybe more than one! I figured the modern Jesus was based on a real man: a charismatic, rebellious mortal with some forward-thinking ideas and a really effective street team. But no supernatural powers until storytellers

gave him some. I hadn't seen any evidence of the supernatural, so I also hadn't seen evidence that gods really exist, at least not in the way most churches claim.

When I met Gregory, he described himself as a recovering Catholic. We didn't talk about religion a whole lot. It only really came up the first time he took off his shirt and I saw his colorful tattoo of Saint Michael the Archangel slaying Satan in the form of a dragon. It's on his left pectoral. I figured if he was extremely religious, our relationship probably wouldn't work out over the long haul. Too many differences, you know? But he said that he'd mostly lost his faith because of bad experiences growing up in the Church. He still appreciated the ritual and symbolism, though. His family attended St. Mary's Catholic Church in Belding, Michigan, and he was quite taken with its stained glass window depicting Saint Michael's battle. He got the tattoo to remind himself that good could triumph over evil.

Gregory said he believed in Jesus and the angels as symbolic figures but not as literal divine beings. He said he didn't really believe in them so much as he liked the idea of them. And that seemed reasonable to me.

Sometimes I envied people who believed in Jesus, heart and soul. I envied their faith that they had been born with a clear spiritual purpose in the world. That they were part of something bigger than themselves. Sometimes I envied them really, really hard.

I knew I wasn't capable of that kind of faith, though; my critical thinking kept getting in the way.

Kleypas was oblivious to the swirl of thoughts she'd set off inside my head, and she'd moved on to my *practical* purpose in the world.

"Obviously, you're allowed to go to work. All employers have been advised of current laws and guidelines."

"Okay." *All of them?* I wondered. It seemed implausible that they'd gotten the word out to tiny under-the-table businesses, family farms that used migrant labor, or every wealthy homeowner who was paying a housekeeper in cash. Of course, any employer who wasn't

paying payroll taxes probably didn't care about PSA regulations, either.

"When you're at work, or out in public—and we recommend staying home unless it's absolutely necessary to go out—you need to wear a mask. *Always.* And you need to make sure it's over your dang nose! You *will* face consequences for noncompliance. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." From what Dr. Sallow had told me, there was still argument about whether the PVG virus was too big to be carried far in the air or not, but sneezes and spit droplets were clearly a problem.

"Good. Because if you don't follow the rules, you'll end up someplace that ain't nearly as nice as Greenlawn."

"Where would I end up, exactly?" My heart beat loud in my ears. It felt unsafe to ask that, but it *was* a fair question.

She eyed me from behind her clear face shield. "Well, obviously, y'all cain't go in with the general population. They've designated certain prisons and county jails as PVG facilities. They're moving all the healthy inmates out of the supermax in Elderville to keep that place open for PVGs who are particularly violent. I assure you, none of those are places you want to go."

"Noted."

Clearly, something in my tone displeased her, but she didn't remark on it. Instead, she asked, "You got kids, Miss Erin?"

I shook my head, a sudden lump rising in my throat. "No."

"Good. That makes everything a lot simpler. Do you have an IUD?"

My stomach clenched and I couldn't help twitching. I had to work hard to keep my face neutral. "Yeah, no, Gregory and I were using condoms."

"You need to make an appointment to get an IUD," she replied briskly. "ASAP."

Oh hell no, I thought.

I'd talked to women who thought their IUDs were the best thing since ice cream. Sure I had. And all respect to them.

But I'd also taken my college roommate Kayleigh to get an IUD when she got her very first boyfriend our freshman year. I held her hand and watched as the nurse laid out an array of plastic and surgical steel tools. And when the doctor put those tools up inside her, each of which came out covered in her blood, I tried to distract her by asking her about her favorite animals. That didn't work for very long. She was in extreme, jaw-clenching pain, and then she straight-up went into shock. Her face had lost all color, her lips had gone gray, she was sweating profusely. Her skin had turned cold and clammy. If the procedure had gone on any longer, I think she would have been in a seriously bad way.

The nurse was lightning quick to give her an ice pack and a juice box afterward. Which seemed like good, proper care at the time. But I thought about it later … and I realized that they'd *clearly expected* some portion of their patients to go into shock during the procedure. Had they warned Kayleigh about that, or about the level of pain she'd experience? No. All they'd done was suggest she take some Tylenol before her appointment. Which she had done, and which was not nearly enough to blunt the torture of *unanesthetized surgery*.

Afterward, I wished her boyfriend could have been there. It wasn't that I minded taking her and holding her hand. But *he* needed to witness her pain. *He* needed to see with his own two eyes what the basic, up-front cost of sex was for her. Then maybe neither she nor I would have heard a single whining complaint from him about how condoms were so uncomfortable.

But the worst part? The gynecologist acted like Kayleigh's pain and shock were some puzzling inconvenience to him, like it was all just in her head. Grade A medical gaslighting. Even before I had a chance to really think about what happened, I wanted to punch him in his nuts and then innocently ask him why he was on the floor, groaning. But obviously, I didn't want to go to jail for assault, either.

So, no thank you. I did *not* want an IUD. Not when I hadn't had a kid to stretch out my uterus first. And that was not going to happen.

"My boyfriend moved out," I told Kleypas. "I'm going to be by myself. And you just told me I can't have new sex partners. So I don't see why I need one."

"Bless your heart." She gave me a hard look. "Are you new to bein' a woman? The world is just bursting with psychos. Some maniac could break into your apartment and rape you. A pregnancy would be a hell of a complication. I hear the virus is turnin' embryos into cancers. Gettin' an IUD is just common sense, honey."

I felt sick. "Couldn't I get an abortion?"

"That's still illegal in this state. PVG didn't change that."

"Seriously? They're not making an exception?"

The counselor shrugged, and gave me a sympathetic, apologetic look. "I think your doctor can still get you Plan B. I *think* morning-after pills are still legal here."

"Well, that's something." I took a deep breath. "I guess you're advising the men to get vasectomies?"

She blinked at me. "Why would we do that?"

CHAPTER 7

“Have you made any new friends lately?” Dr. Shapiro asks.

“There are some new people I chat with. Type Twos and other Type Threes. I met them in online support groups. They’re nice. We’ve had some movie watch parties online. I guess they count as friends?”

She nods. “Have you met with any of your new friends in person?”

“Of course not,” I lie. “That would be illegal, wouldn’t it?”

She nods again. “It would.”

★ ★ ★

Dr. Sallow had scheduled my release for 8:45 p.m. so that the sun would be down by the time I had to go outside. Gregory was supposed to pick me up from Greenlawn. We figured that if I sat in the back row of his SUV and we both wore masks and kept the windows partway down, that would be enough air circulation and social distancing to keep his risk of infection low. But we’d have the chance to see each other in person, chat a bit on the drive to the apartment. At least share an elbow bump before he left, even if we couldn’t hug or kiss. It would be better than nothing, right?

But after Kleypas left me with my folder of paper and deep misgivings, I checked my iPhone and discovered that Gregory had texted me.

Im so so sorry honey but work is blowing up.
they called me back in. legit emergency here.
gonna have to work late into the nite. Found
a service called DocRyde and called u a car.
driver's name is Betty. ETA 9:00.

I started crying well before any coherent thoughts formed in my head. Getting to see Gregory was practically the only thing I'd really been looking forward to that week. I'd already tried to practice radical acceptance about the situation. About not being able to sink into his arms, not being able to fall asleep on the tattoo of Saint Michael on his chest. I'd tried to get my head and heart right about all those things, and I thought I'd done an okay job.

But to not be able to see him at all that day? I wasn't just disappointed. I felt utterly abandoned, discarded, even if logically I knew he was still doing his best to see that I was taken care of. My head couldn't convince my heart that everything would be okay.

When can i see you? I texted back.

Video chat 2nite? i can come by this wknd?

The weekend felt like it was years away. What would I do to distract myself until then? But I typed back, **ok. love u.**

love u too.

I swiped the chat app away and cried for a few more minutes. Then dried my face, got my stuff together, and let Nurse Tesfaye know I was ready to go downstairs.

★ ★ ★

Darius escorted me out to the front parking circle and we waited for my ride. It was the first time I'd been outside in weeks. I breathed deeply, smelling honeysuckle and lilac on the warm spring air. The air felt real. But when I looked around me, part of my brain was convinced that this was all a clever illusion, that I'd walked out onto a

Hollywood set and not into the real world. Dr. Sallow mentioned I might get this feeling sometimes. *Derealization,* he said it was.

"You got anything fun planned after this?" Darius asked.

I laughed bitterly. "What am I gonna do that's fun? Can't go to the bar, can't go to the beach, can't go to the movies, can't get laid."

It felt taboo to mention sex around Darius. Which I guess is why I said it.

He, of course, was utterly unperturbed. "There's always video games. The new *Far Cry* is pretty sick."

"That's true. I could try games." The idea didn't really fill me with much enthusiasm.

I saw the headlights of an electric car coming up the long, oak-shaded drive well before I heard its artificial engine noise or the rumble of its tires across the uneven blacktop.

"Looks like your ride's here," Darius said.

A green Toyota Sienna with DOCRYDE stenciled on the side in white lettering pulled into the circle. A young woman in a blue paper mask slid out of the driver's seat and came around the side with a small tablet in a purple case.

"Erin Holdaway?" She used one hand to absently flip her long chestnut hair away from her side-shave.

I stood frozen, staring at her hair. Flashing back on the recurring nightmare I'd had in the hospital. This woman was a stranger, but … I was sure she looked just like the woman in the dream who'd pulled me free of the tar pit. The one who'd pushed me through the motel door.

"Miss Holdaway?" Darius touched my shoulder. "You still with us?"

"What? Yeah." My cheeks flushed warm, and I looked from him to her. "Yes, I'm Erin Holdaway. Sorry."

The young woman didn't seem fazed. "My name is Betty, and I'm here from DocRyde. Gregory Watkins contacted us to give you a ride to your apartment. Does that sound right?"

"Yeah, that's right," I said.

"And is this your address?" She showed me her screen.

“Yeah.”

“Great!” She opened the rear door of the van and let me climb inside with my plastic bag of stuff. The air inside the vehicle smelled strongly of disinfectant. The van was equipped with a wheelchair lift, and one row of seats had been taken out. A sturdy floor-to-ceiling Plexiglas panel separated the front seats from the passenger section. I settled in the back right as Betty got into the driver’s seat.

“All belted in?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Yep.”

“Super. Gotta follow all the rules.” She put the van into gear and slowly circled back to the long driveway.

“Yeah. Lots of rules to follow now, I guess.” I couldn’t stop staring at her side-shave. And I wanted to tell her about the dream I’d had about her before I’d even met her, but there was no way that wouldn’t make me seem like I’d absolutely lost my mind. No way that wouldn’t seem creepy.

“So, uh, I’ve never heard of DocRyde before,” I said, desperately casting about for a safe topic of conversation.

I didn’t want to just sit there in silence, because then I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from thinking about the dream. I couldn’t *really* have dreamed about her, could I? It had to be my mind playing tricks on me. Editing my memory to make it *seem* like she’d been the one I’d dreamed of. She’d been blurry in most of it, anyhow, and young women with chestnut hair and side-shaves had to be pretty common, right? It *had* to be just a strange memory thing.

I was fine. I wasn’t losing my mind. Everything would be fine.

“Yeah, it’s a pretty new service,” she said. “I guess they launched sometime last year, but business really picked up for them during the pandemic.”

“Have you been driving for them very long?” I was starting to realize that, even with the barrier up, I could smell Betty. Not her perfume. *Her.* And she smelled fucking delicious.

I didn’t know whether I wanted to make out with her in the back of the van or crack her skull open. Maybe both. Jesus Christ. What was

wrong with me?

“Just a couple of weeks,” she replied, oblivious to the state I was in, thank God. “I had to go to the hospital, and afterward the restaurant laid me off. They didn’t have a choice. Can’t have me sweating and breathing on the duck à l’orange, you know? But after that, I still needed a job. DocRyde needed people who didn’t mind driving PVG patients around at night. So here I am.”

My physical reaction to her was making it hard to focus on what she was saying. “You … you caught PVG, too?”

Why hadn’t I reacted to any of the hospital staff like this? I’d occasionally wanted to kill them for their brains, sure. Just a passing urge. But I’d never been viscerally attracted to any of them like this. And it wasn’t because I found them unattractive: Dr. Sallow had a silver fox thing going on, Darius had an amazing body, and Nurse Tesfaye was a damn pretty woman. I never felt like I’d seriously lose control around any of them. At least not for more than a few seconds.

I’d been in the van for more than a few seconds, and my body was convinced that Betty was an absolute, entire snack.

“Yup,” Betty said. “Type Two, if you’re curious. And no, we’re not breaking any rules being in this van together.” She rapped the Plexiglas barrier with the back of her right hand. “This is business. Precautions taken and all.”

Was I reacting to her like this because she was a Two? Was *this* the reason we were forbidden from getting with other Types? Maybe it wasn’t about mutations so much as the possibility of horrifying bloodbath orgies? Couldn’t really blame Homeland Security for wanting to nip that in the bud.

“What did you do before?” I asked, praying that she had a Taser tucked away someplace, in case I did something really, really stupid. Thinking about Homeland Security was helping me calm down. A little, anyway.

“I was sous chef at Le Pamplemousse.” She sighed. “Working in a kitchen is a tough job. Long hours on your feet, you know? Burns …

cuts … the chef losing his mind and screaming at everyone. Crazy stress. Driving is a whole lot easier. But I miss the restaurant so much sometimes. The energy, the camaraderie we all had."

"I bet." I took a deep breath, trying to focus on what she'd said. Trying to imagine what being a sous chef was like. I'd never worked in food service, but the cooking shows certainly made it seem like a high-pressure environment. "HR says I still have a job, but I don't know that it will be the same one. It probably *can't* be, since I can't be out in the daytime much. I have no clue what they'll do with me."

"It's good you still have a job, though. A lot of us have been fired. What did you do before?"

"Desktop support," I said. "It's fun. I get to help people with their computers at UCC. *Got* to, anyhow."

"Hey." She adjusted the rearview mirror so she could look at me. Meeting her gaze absolutely thrilled me. "This is going to sound like some dumb pickup line—and I promise you it isn't—but. Haven't I seen you around before?"

My heart beat faster in my chest. I started sweating. *Don't tell her about the stupid dream. Don't.*

"No, I'm pretty sure we haven't met before this. I've … I've never been to Le Pamplemousse."

"What about Hot Chicken Domination? The Sassy Gal Saloon? The swing dance club in University North?"

I shook my head. "No. I haven't been to any of those places."

"Huh. Weird! It's just that you seem *super* familiar. Anyhow, those are all amazing spots and you should totally go." She winced behind her mask. "I mean, whenever we're allowed to go anywhere again."

★ ★ ★

When I got back into the apartment, I turned on our bedroom TV to drown out the awful silence. Gregory had left it tuned to CNN. The screen showed shaky aerial video of a large square concrete building engulfed in smoke and flame. My stomach dropped. This did not look good.

“PVG vaccine production efforts suffered a major setback this afternoon,” a woman announced over the video. “Multiple manufacturing sites across the US were targeted in a coordinated fire bombing attack. Thirty people are dead and hundreds are missing or injured. The neo-Nazi antivax group Blood Pure has claimed responsibility.”

The screen switched to a feed of a man in a white balaclava, sunglasses, and gray combat fatigues standing in what looked like a concrete bunker. An AR-15 was slung across his chest. “Today, we have struck a blow—”

“Not today, Satan.” I flipped over to my music streaming service and cued up some chillwave. “I can’t stop you, but at least I don’t have to listen to your violent bullshit.”

I opened a spa basket I’d been saving for a romantic getaway and decided to bath bomb my senses into oblivion. If a nice soak didn’t help me sleep that night, well, at least it would get the stink of Greenlawn out of my pores.

My iPhone pinged as I was toweling off.

Gregory had texted me: **got time 4 a video chat? Use ur cmpter.… i wanna screen share something.**

Sure. Give me a sec, I replied.

I put on my fluffy purple robe and went into the bedroom to boot up my laptop. A few moments later, I logged in to my video chat program and connected.

“Hi, sweetie.” Gregory grinned and waved at me. He was in black boxers and a plain white T-shirt, sitting cross-legged on a bed, his back against a blank beige wall. “Did your ride home go okay?”

“Yeah, it was fine. No problems.”

“That’s good.” He looked a little ashamed. “I’m so, so sorry that I couldn’t be there myself.”

“It’s okay. Honest. I know you’re doing your best. I really appreciate that you cleaned the place up for me.”

“The least I could do, considering.”

“How have you been? Did things calm down at work?”

“Yes, *finally*.” He rolled his eyes, looking exasperated. “But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah!” His expression brightened. “Lemme share my screen…”

My view switched from Gregory to a gallery of computer-rendered garden images: rows of bright tulips and willow-shaded hostas. A carpet of pink and purple phlox around a calm koi pond with a wooden footbridge. They looked like high-end landscaping designs.

“Those are nice,” I said. “What are they for?”

“So there’s this place up in the hills outside town.” He switched the view back to his face. “I’d never heard of it until the other day, when Mark Mayne came to the office and a couple of us started chatting with him.”

Gregory paused, looking pleased and expectant. Like he figured I’d be impressed.

So I had to wince and say, “I’m sorry, honey. I don’t know who that is.”

“Oh.” His face fell. “He’s been all over the local news…”

“Remember that whole hospital thing?”

“Ope.” He blushed in embarrassment. “Yeah. Sorry. Anyhow, he’s the CEO of Mayne Sequence Solar, which just had their IPO. Investors went *nuts* for it. Mayne Sequence is like the only big local company that isn’t floundering around like a dinosaur in a tar pit right now. Good news is hard to come by, so he’s getting a lot of press.”

“Gotcha. So, what does he have to do with the photos?”

“Right. The place up in the hills was the family mansion in the nineteenth century. His great-whatevs Charles Castaigne had it built in 1855. Gothic revival, looks like a castle. Had *amazing* gardens. People came from all over to see them. But the family hit hard times after the 1929 stock market crash and they lost the house to the bank, which sold it to another bank, et cetera. It stood empty and nearly abandoned for nearly a century.”

Gregory made a sad trombone noise. “But, a few years ago, Mark—he told me to call him Mark—got the money together to buy back

Castaigne Manor and the grounds. He's planning to bring the gardens back even bigger and fancier than they were. He's going to open them up for tours, weddings, corporate events."

He paused, grinning. I sensed that a serious bro crush had taken hold.

"I really hit it off with Mark, and he offered me a special no-deposit deal on a reservation. It's good for two years after they open. We're gonna have such a rad wedding there! We'll have all this space, and it'll be absolutely gorgeous … Seriously, look at this!"

His window switched to an image of a white gazebo surrounded by blossoming cherry and pear trees. Behind it rose a gothic manor with a crenellated tower.

My vision blurred and my heart began to beat fast. Details of the strange dream I'd had in the Greenlawn courtyard started flooding back. Details I thought I'd forgotten.

Or had I forgotten anything? Maybe my brain was just editing my memory to make me think that the castle manor in the landscaping mock-up was the same one I'd dreamed about. I couldn't know for sure.

"Are you okay?" Gregory looked concerned.

"Yeah. I … I blank out a little sometimes, still. The doctor said it's a side effect of the fever. Hopefully it'll go away soon."

"Do you need to go to bed? Get some rest?"

"Yeah, I probably should. I love you."

"Love you, too."

After we signed off, I put on my pajamas but didn't go to bed right away. Just puttered around in the kitchen, trying to shake off the lingering creepy feeling I had, trying to figure out what I needed to get from the grocery store.

Shortly before midnight, there was a soft knocking at my front door. Three gentle raps and then silence. I thought it could be a noise from the apartment upstairs, or maybe air in a pipe. It was far too late for anyone to come for a visit. But I went to the door to check, just in case.

On my doormat was a brown padded mailing envelope with “For Erin” written in blue ballpoint on the front. Neat block lettering. I glanced around; nobody was in the breezeway. I picked up the envelope and ducked back inside my apartment, latching the door behind me.

I stared at the envelope. Who could have left this? Should I open it? Whatever was inside was hard, rectangular. Solid. Definitely not a dead rat. And it was the wrong shape to be a vial of poison.

So I decided to stop wondering and tore open the adhesive flap.

And pulled out the compact, shiny black slab of an Android phone. An inexpensive prepaid LG model. I clicked the side button to wake it up. It was unlocked. On the home screen, a digital note was open.

Text me sometime. This = 1K texts, no voice, no data.
I really hope I hear from you.❤—B.

CHAPTER 8

“Have you been able to engage in rewarding personal hobbies and other activities?” Dr. Shapiro asks.

“Yes, I’ve been keeping myself busy when I’m not at work,” I reply. “I’m not bored.”

She checks off another box. “That’s good to hear.”

★ ★ ★

I spent hours poring over the prepaid burner phone Betty had left me. Searching every folder for spyware and malware. Carefully taking the case off and checking it for mysterious chips or bugs. Aside from the note and putting a number in the address book, it looked like she hadn’t tampered with it. She hadn’t even applied OS updates. It certainly didn’t have the hateful Homeland Security app on it.

So I was pretty sure it was clean. *Pretty* sure. But I’ve never been a genuine phone expert. And obviously I wasn’t going to do a whole lot of web searching on the subject on my iPhone. Or my laptop. My PowerBook didn’t seem to have been tampered with, but who knew what had gone on at the apartment while I was away?

I already knew Gregory wouldn’t tell me things if people he saw as health authorities had told him not to reveal them. He’d probably tell me if he wasn’t telling me something … but there was the possibility he didn’t know, either. I hadn’t even started on the thick folder Kleypas had given me. For all I knew, the new law empowered

Homeland Security to make the landlord quietly let them into our apartment to plant surveillance equipment.

Calm down, I thought. *How likely is that, really?*

Surveillance took time, equipment, and staff. All that took *money*. It was one thing for politicians to beat their chests about national security and public safety, but it was another thing for them to actually spend the necessary funds on it all. They hadn't bothered to give me an ankle monitor. So the simplest probability was also the likeliest: they were mostly using the software they'd installed on my iPhone to monitor me. Just like they told me to my face.

But. It was possible that someone had the bright idea to really ramp up the for-profit prisons in this state. Want to get hundreds if not thousands of fresh bodies into prison call centers and garment factories? Inflict a bunch of draconian, difficult-to-abide-by laws on a newly Othered group that's been stripped of its civil rights. The profits could be tremendous.

And in that light … this phone was an obvious honeypot. A trap that would ultimately land me in the supermax in Elderville. Or someplace just as awful.

On the other hand, we Types 2 and 3 were a sickly bunch. The state might stand to spend at least as much on health care as it would make on telesales or athletic jerseys.

So I was back on the simplest probability: my iPhone was my personal spy. And if that was the situation, then Betty giving me a burner phone for texting her was the most logical way to get around it. My iPhone could pick up my conversations, but it wouldn't record me texting on another device, particularly if they weren't on the same network.

And, frankly? I was impressed by Betty's casual power move. The phone in my hands represented cleverness, dedication, and follow-through. I found all those things quite alluring.

Jesus, what are you doing? I thought. *You're seriously thinking of cheating on Gregory with a woman you just met? You don't even really know if she's into you. You know nothing about her.*

I wanted to know all about her, though. I wanted that pretty badly. I wanted it nearly as much as I'd wanted to eat Dr. Sallow's brain during the test in Greenlawn.

But I didn't want to hurt Gregory. I *never* wanted to hurt Gregory. That's why I was alone in the apartment—so I couldn't hurt him by infecting him or assaulting him.

Our relationship was too important to destroy. What else did I have left in my life now? Maybe our bond was going to fracture anyhow under the stress of it suddenly becoming a long-distance thing, even though we were still in the same city. But I couldn't deliberately do something I knew would jeopardize what we'd built during our five years together. Not over what so far only amounted to lust and fantasy. At best. What kind of monster would I have to be to do that?

Gregory was a good man. He was someone I could count on, no questions. He treated me with respect. Sure, our sex life was a little vanilla, a little routine, but so what? It was fine. He was the kind of guy millions of women would be perfectly happy to settle down with.

But … Gregory was also the reason I had met Betty. Caught between commitments to me and to his work, he'd chosen work, like a good American. I couldn't blame him for that. But there were consequences for every decision. Only, I guess a counselor from Homeland Security didn't show up at the apartment to warn him first.

I sighed to myself, staring at my distorted reflection in the glass of the burner's dark screen. Whatever I ultimately decided to do, I needed to talk to Gregory first.

★ ★ ★

I splurged on a half pound of pork brains from a little mercado a few miles away. The butcher paper–wrapped package was thirty dollars. The masked delivery guy dropped it on my doormat and scampered away like he'd just completed a heroin deal. But I'd been lucky to find any at all; Kroger and the other supermarkets were completely out. And the supply chain situation was only going to get worse as more

people got infected and survived. The pandemic had turned an unpopular offal item into gourmet unobtainium.

I didn't know what I would do when I couldn't get brains at all and had to rely solely on my prescription supplement, bovellum. It's what I and every other upstanding, gainfully employed, fully insured Type Three citizen in America gets: a meager allotment of refrigerated capsules containing an unappetizing gray paste. Mostly it's cow brains fortified with glutamate, GABA, choline, amino acids, antioxidant vitamins, a few fatty acids, and just the barest hint of pureed cadaver white matter. It's enough to keep your skin and brains from ulcerating. It's enough to keep your nose from rotting off. It's enough to help you think clearly enough to function at your average white-collar job.

It is not enough to keep you from constantly wishing you could taste the real thing. Lightly poached pork brains bulked out with egg whites weren't really the real thing, either, but they were more satisfying than bovellum capsules. The ultimate in comfort food, at least for the new me.

I needed a custard bowl of it in my hands before I had The Talk with my fiancé Friday night.

"Howdy, stranger." I waved at Gregory through my laptop's webcam.

"Hey, night owl!" He grinned at me. It looked like he was out on his brother's backyard deck; the last pink streaks of the sunset were just visible over the dark maples silhouetted behind him. "How are things going at the apartment?"

"They're going okay. The blackout curtains are working out really well—thanks for putting those up."

"It was the least I could do for my sweetie! You all fixed for supplies?"

I nodded. "I got grocery and prescription deliveries set up, and I'm getting used to the third-shift schedule."

"Where did they put you?"

“Network ops. I was sort of hoping for a remote, flex-hours kind of gig, maybe as a coder, but apparently they desperately needed a new warm body to babysit the mainframes and server farm.”

Gregory raised his eyebrows. “That’s unexpected. They know you’re still contagious, right?”

“They know!” I shrugged at him. “Apparently I get a socially distanced workstation, and I get the single-seat handicapped restroom down the hall all to myself. And Mareva works the same shift I’ll be on. She’ll be good to chat with, even if it has to be at a distance.”

“It’s really nice that you already know someone there.”

“It is. Honestly, the situation could be a lot worse,” I said. “Speaking of … How are things going with your brother?”

His expression clouded. “It’s okay. Not great, not terrible. We had a bit of a fight over dishes a little while ago. It’s like he expects me to do them all the time, and it’s just so tedious … but if I don’t do them, they pile up forever and we get ants.”

“Dishes and laundry, the never-ending chores.” I paused to eat a nice big spoonful of brains. Steeling myself. “Hey. I wanted to talk to you about something. It’s … awkward, I guess.”

He frowned, looking concerned. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing bad!” I assured him. “It’s just … I’ve been thinking about how we can’t be close to each other anymore, and about how that’s, you know, going to cause stress…”

He looked cautious, and a little confused. “Yeah…?”

Another spoonful of brains. I desperately wanted to tell him the truth. I’d left my iPhone in the bathroom with the fan on, and closed the door, but I couldn’t be sure that nobody was listening in on my laptop as well.

“It’s … not fair to you that you can’t get physical comfort,” I finally said. “It’s not fair that you can’t have that. And I don’t want us cheating on each other. Cheating is lying. And lying eats away at a relationship.”

Christ. I was telling him all these perfectly true things and they were still all lies by omission. Lies and meta-lies.

Meanwhile, Gregory's expression had turned to something close to fawn-in-the-headlights terror. "What … what are you saying?"

I took a deep breath, squinching my eyes shut. "I'm saying it's okay with me if you see other women right now. I love you and I don't want to break up with you, but I think it would be better under the circumstances if we had an open relationship. For now. I … I mean, obviously *I* can't see anyone. That wouldn't be legal. Obviously."

I felt like I'd started babbling, so I stopped talking and opened my eyes.

Gregory was staring at me, white-faced. If I didn't know better, I'd almost think he looked guilty.

"An open relationship?" He sounded stunned.

"I mean, for now. And … and you don't have to tell your friends, or anyone in your family. *Please* don't tell your brother or he's gonna try to drag you to some nasty brothel."

I gave a nervous little laugh to show I was mostly joking. I couldn't really picture him going to a brothel. The first time he and I had sex, I'd had to coax him like I was trying to get a baby rabbit to eat from my hand. He'd been too embarrassed to let me see him fully naked for months afterward.

Gregory looked stricken. His mouth worked, but no words came out. Oh God. I'd shocked him. Horrified him. Mortally offended him, maybe.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "Please say something."

"But…" He gaped like a goldfish out of water. "But how would me seeing other women be fair to you? How could that not hurt you?"

"I mean, you wouldn't have to, like, give me a play-by-play after you went on a date or anything."

"But what if I fell in love? What then?"

I took another deep breath. I'd expected him to ask this, and had carefully thought out my answer. But I ate another spoonful of brains before I answered, just the same. "Okay, this is a huge *if,* but,

hypothetically … if I can get well again, do you still want to have kids with me someday?"

"Of course I do."

"And if I had a baby boy, you'd love him?"

"Of course! Absolutely!"

"And if, two or three years later, I had a baby girl, you'd love her, too, right?"

"Naturally, yes."

"Would loving your baby daughter make you stop loving your son?"

He looked deeply hurt. "Of course not! I'd love both my kids!"

"Okay, so if you can love more than one child at a time, why can't you love more than one woman at a time? Why does romantic love have to be different than the love you have for family?" I asked. "Is romantic love like a birthday cake, where you hand it out and then there's none left for anyone else?"

His mouth went a bit slack, his eyes widening. I figured I'd just blown his mind.

"No … no, I guess it's not like a cake," he finally said.

"All I ask is that you be safe, you know? Don't catch PVG or HIV or anything else with initials. And be up front with whoever you see. Make sure she knows that you have a fiancée. Make sure she's a person who learned about sharing in kindergarten. I can't say I'd be *thrilled* if you fell in love with someone else, but … it's not like I can demand that you not love someone. That's a horrible thing to ask. And it's not like you can just flip a switch and decide you're not going to fall for someone."

At least, *I* couldn't.

He nodded cautiously. "That … seems reasonable, I suppose."

"And … I might never get healthy again." The admission made my whole body sag in my seat. "If you fall in love with someone else, and you really like her better, then maybe that's just fate. I want to be part of your happiness; I don't want to be the thing that keeps you from being happy."

I paused. “So … are you okay with trying an open relationship?”

“Are *you* sure you’re okay with it?” he asked.

“Yes. And if I get mad later, please just remind me that this was all my idea.”

“If you’re sure,” he said. “Then yes, I’m okay with it.”

“Okay. I’m glad. I think it’s for the best. Look, it’s getting late and I should probably let you go. I love you.”

“I love you, too, sweetie.”

“Good-bye.”

I logged off and finished the bits of brains left in the little bowl. Scooped the crumbs up with my finger and licked them off. This was the best conversation I’d had with Gregory in weeks, and I felt like an absolute monster.

CHAPTER 9

“Are you exercising regularly?” Dr. Shapiro asks.

“I’m trying to,” I reply. “I work out at home, and sometimes I go for walks at dusk or in the early morning, when it’s still twilight.”

“I suppose it’s not safe to go walking late at night, is it?” she commented.

“No, it’s not very safe at all.”

★ ★ ★

A few nights before I started back at UCC, I decided to do a test run of my nightly commute. Partly because I had no idea what traffic was like at that hour and partly because I wanted to make sure my Honda and my driving skills were okay. Gregory had taken my car out once every week or so to make sure the tires didn’t get flat spots, but other than that it had pretty much just been sitting.

After I got on the freeway, I decided I should go ahead and gas up, so I pulled off at an exit that had a handy Speedway. I was approaching the back of the convenience store, so I couldn’t see the front doors as I drove up. The fuel canopy lights were on, but there didn’t seem to be any customers. I pulled up to one of the pumps and got out to unscrew my gas cap.

And I nearly peed myself when a man off to my right screamed, “Freeze! Put your hands up where I can see them.”

My hands shot up automatically and I turned slightly to see who was shouting at me. A SWAT cop in full urban battle gear. And he was pointing a riot shotgun at my head.

“I said *freeze*!” he screamed. With his protective goggles on, he reminded me of some black predatory beetle. Even though I knew how many cops had behaved during the coronavirus years, I was still surprised that he wasn’t wearing a mask.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir,” I stammered.

“Are you with those freaks? Driving getaway?” he demanded.

“I—I don’t understand. I’m just here for gas.”

I finally looked past him, and saw the bloody carnage in the doorway of the convenience store. There were four bodies that I could see, lying on the sidewalk or holding the sliding doors open. Three were missing huge chunks of their skulls, I figured from shotgun blasts, and their hands were caked in gore. Jesus Christ.

The fourth corpse might have been the store clerk. She’d been torn wide open at the neck and wrists. Bled nearly dry.

“I came up the back way.” My voice shook. “I couldn’t see.”

“You expect me to believe that? You’re a freak like them. You got freak eyes.”

“If … if I were a getaway driver, wouldn’t I drive up to the front of the store? Not over here to the pumps?”

He didn’t say anything. Didn’t lower the shotgun. His eyes flickered down to my Honda, then at the credit card clutched in my hand.

“I have a disease.” *Oh God I’m going to die here.* “If … if you shoot me, you’ll breathe it in.”

“Fuck me,” he growled, lowering the shotgun maybe an inch. “You got any gas in your tank?”

Hope soared inside me. “A couple gallons?”

“Then get the fuck out of here. Right the fuck *now*.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

★ ★ ★

I was still completely high on adrenaline when I got back to my apartment, and that gave me the courage to finally text Betty.

New phone, who dis?

The three dots pulsed. A moment later: **LOL. Plz tell me where we met w/o lDing me.**

Green Toyota van, I keyed in. **You gave me a ride home.**

And u were wearing jeans and tee shirt.
What was I wearing?

Crap. I had to be honest in my reply: **I wasn't looking at ur clothes, sorry. But u wore vanilla perfume. U had purple tablet case. Chestnut hair w/side shave.**

LOL ok, she typed back. **You pass the test. U want to meet up somewhere for drinks and chat?**

Yes, definitely.

★ ★ ★

We agreed to meet up at 10 p.m. in an industrial area a couple of miles from me, the following Friday. Our rendezvous wasn't in the best neighborhood, and that worried me plenty, but she promised it would be worth it. I could have driven there, to be physically safer, but my Honda had built-in GPS. Even if that was secure, I couldn't be sure that someone hadn't planted a tracker. I decided I'd just walk there, carry pepper spray, and take my chances.

The four days between our text chat and the actual date were agonizing. My nerves were keyed up so much I had a much harder time than usual sleeping during the day. Had I just agreed to meet a Homeland Security agent posing as Betty? Was I going to end up in prison?

Or was it really Betty on the other burner—but the virus had turned her into one of the crazed, bloodthirsty murderers I heard about on the news? Or maybe she was working with a group of Twos and she'd agreed to be the bait. Was I going to end up in a shallow unmarked grave?

Or was I just being paranoid and this was nothing more than the most normal first date that we could manage under deeply abnormal circumstances?

Honestly? Most of the first dates I'd been on involved possible serial killer scenarios floating around in the back of my head. And while the idea that I might end up raped or dead had been relatively easy to push away, I always took the usual precautions with men I didn't really know. Meet in a well-lit, public spot I was familiar with. Know where the exits are. Keep an eagle eye on my food and drinks. Tell a friend where I was going and who I'd be with.

But now, my status as a Type Three meant all those simple, routine precautions were impossible. Staying safe from the law meant engaging in wildly unsafe behavior. My situation was ironic and terrifying.

I could ghost her. Of course I could. I could absolutely chicken out and stay in my apartment behind my blackout drapes. I'd be safe from the world and the world would be safe from me.

But if I did that, how was I ever going to live any kind of life now? I'd just be existing. My life would be work and sleep, meds and walking, bland food and TV, and that would be it. I'd want to hang myself before the year was over.

So, despite my buzzing nerves and aching stomach, I decided to go through with it.

I'd established a pattern of watching shows or movies for a few hours every night, so around 9 p.m. I left my iPhone sitting on the couch with the TV on and tuned to HBO. Pocketed the burner and my spray, put on my mask, and headed out, closing and locking the door behind me as quietly as I could.

★ ★ ★

I don't mind walking. My body is so thin now, so light, it feels like almost no effort. Even when I'm too stupid to do anything else, I can walk. Lots of things hurt pretty much all the time, my guts and my head especially. But my feet and legs are fine. And walking until I'm

so exhausted that I just want to sleep is the only thing that reliably takes the edge off my hunger when *that* gets bad.

I can walk for miles and miles. It takes me a while. I'm not fast. But I can get almost anywhere in the city if I have the time.

Problem is, I don't have nearly enough time, and I know it.

★ ★ ★

I caught Betty's scent before I saw her. Just as snacktastic and delicious as she had smelled in the van. She was waiting for me under a streetlamp by a tall wooden fence, her face shadowed under the lightweight black hoodie she wore despite the damp heat of the evening. Beneath the hoodie, she was wearing a long, satiny black dress and witchy black ankle boots. I'd worn my best jeans, a nice floral tank top, and sturdy shoes I could run in if I had to. It was warm enough that I couldn't stand anything on my arms. Now I felt awkwardly underdressed.

"Aren't you hot in that?" I said. "Temperature-wise. Because, I mean, you're *definitely* hot in that."

Joking lightly. Trying to make a good impression. Trying desperately not to show how badly I wanted to throw her against the fence and do a terrible thing.

My anxiety eased a fraction when she laughed. "Thank you. I'm fine in this. I've felt cold all the time since I got sick."

"Right. I guess that happens a lot for Type Twos?" I winced under my mask. *Way to be a smooth talker, Erin.*

I'd nervously and optimistically shaved my bikini line and put on a lacy red bra and matching thong that night. An expensive pair I'd ordered online one night when I was feeling particularly pent up. Which practically guaranteed we weren't going to fool around. Sex on a first date only seemed to happen when I was unshaven and wearing ratty, embarrassing underwear. Those instances had been with guys, who largely didn't seem to notice my body hair or what underwear I had on anyhow. Too busy getting to the goodies. But not knowing Betty, I worried I'd be more subject to scrutiny. To critique.

“At least half of us have trouble staying warm,” she replied. “You look cute, too, by the way.”

She was wearing a paper mask, same as me, so I couldn’t tell if she was smiling or not. I looked up and down the street; we were standing under the only significant illumination for three blocks in either direction. I didn’t see any bars or restaurants or anything that looked like a possible hangout spot.

“So, what’s here?” I asked. “What did you want to show me?”

Her eyes crinkled; she was definitely smiling now. “Follow me.”

Betty led me down the sidewalk a few yards until we reached a gap in the boards.

“This way.” She ducked through the gap, and I uncertainly followed. Maybe we were going to a hidden patio?

My mood dropped. We were in a junkyard full of old and wrecked cars. Maybe a pick-and-pull kind of place where budget auto mechanics went searching for spare parts. Certainly not a setting I’d imagined for a first date. Unease formed a hard lump in the pit of my stomach.

“You’re not a serial killer, are you?” I joked. *Ha-ha, only serious.*

She took her mask off so I could see her face in the dimness. Her lipstick was a very dark purple. “You’re perfectly safe here. Have some faith. It’s just a little further.”

Despite my profound misgivings, I followed her through the maze of scrapped cars, deeper into the junkyard. “How do you know this place?”

“The third-shift fleet mechanic at DocRyde goes here a lot to get parts. I come with him to help out sometimes. He gets nervous being alone here after dark.” She paused, craning her neck. “Ah, it’s over here.”

She gestured for me to keep following her. Soon we came to a clearing, and in the middle, gleaming ghostly in the moonlight, was a white Nissan Leaf stretch limousine. Betty pulled a key fob out of her hoodie pocket and pressed a button. The limousine’s interior light came on—the passenger windows were deeply tinted, so I mostly

saw the illumination through the front windows—and I heard the click of locks releasing.

“Come on in.” Betty opened the back door. Soft yellow light streamed into the junkyard. I glimpsed smooth white leather seats and dark wood panel accents. Two bench seats faced each other, and in the middle of the gray carpeted floor was a small stainless steel cooler. Nobody else was in the limo. No gang of Twos waiting to pounce.

So I followed her inside, settling myself on the bench opposite her, the cooler between us. I pulled the door shut.

Oh God, oh God we were really doing this. I started to sweat.

“How … um, how did you find this limo?” I asked, glancing around. It even still had that new car smell to it.

“I was here when the DoubleTree hotel had it hauled in on a flatbed.” She looked extremely pleased with herself. “Somehow their shuttle driver broke the axle. Had to be an absolute monster pothole. They could have fixed it, but I guess it was better as a tax write-off or something. It’s perfectly fine apart from the busted shaft.”

She pressed another button on the fob to start the electric engine. I heard the hiss of the air conditioner coming on. King Princess’s “Ohio” started playing softly through the speakers. Betty unzipped her black hoodie and shrugged out of it. The dress beneath had thin spaghetti straps, a fitted bodice, and a plunging neckline. And, damn, she looked good in it. I wanted to bury my face in her cleavage. I’m sure she had probably lost weight, but as opposed to me, she actually looked *healthy*.

I was pinioned between desire and insecurity. “I, uh, I really like your dress.”

“Thank you.” She leaned over to open the cooler. I probably should have been enjoying the very nice view of her breasts, but I found myself staring at the top of her head instead.

Crap. I didn’t know what to say next. “So, um, were you a goth before? Or are you just, you know, embracing the *Children of the Night* vibe and all?”

She laughed and handed me a cold can of soda water. “Some of column A, some of column B. I like dancing. Me and my girlfriend ended up at the goth club sometimes. Helps to look like you belong there, you know? So I had a few outfits, and … well, black’s just a very practical color for me these days. Sexy and it doesn’t show stains. And it’s harder for the cops to see you at night if you don’t wanna be seen.”

“That’s true.” I opened my can. Took off my mask and set it aside so I could drink. The act of removing it felt taboo and made me feel incredibly exposed. “You, uh, have a girlfriend?”

“Had.” She shrugged sadly and pulled another dripping can from the cooler. “Louise was scared of catching the virus, so she broke up with me right after I got out of the hospital. We’d been together about a year. Maybe it wouldn’t have lasted anyway, but it sucked for it to end like that.”

“I’m really sorry to hear it. My boyfriend moved out before I got home,” I said. “I mean, we agreed that was best. We haven’t broken up, but … we agreed to open up the relationship. I … I don’t like the idea of cheating. But I haven’t told him about you.”

“And *that’s* probably for the best.” She sipped her soda water. “I know all the cloak-and-dagger stuff with the phones probably seemed like an overreaction, but…”

“It didn’t seem that way,” I replied. “It’s just hard to know how closely anyone’s watching us.”

Betty nodded. “I mean, they’re straight-up merking Types who lose their shit in public. Even if all that blood just creates another biohazard.”

My stomach dropped; this was the first I’d heard of it. “What?”

“They got snipers posted on all the buildings downtown now, and undercover officers at all the big shopping centers. They’re keeping the media from covering the killings, so most people don’t know yet.”

“Is … is that legal?”

She shrugged. “Well, they’re doing it. You been watching *Dr. Kaz Chats*?”

I shook my head. “Is that a network show? Streaming?”

“It’s on YouTube. Dr. Alexandria Kasabian is a virologist at the university. She’s had the channel a couple of years, but ever since the pandemic, she’s been focusing on PVG. And it’s not just medicine and science; she’s been bringing in legal experts, local activists. It’s been really accurate. Good stuff.”

“I’ll make sure to check it out.”

Betty took another drink from her soda water and then fixed me in a direct, speculative gaze that made me nervous. “So, you mentioned a boyfriend. Have you been with a woman before?”

“Yes.” I shifted on my seat. “Not since college, though.”

She absently ran her finger over the lip of her can. “Was it a drunk-in-the-dorm thing or deliberate?”

I felt myself blush. My heart hammered. “It was pretty deliberate.” Then I paused as I remembered the night my roommate Kayleigh and I kissed in bed after we went partying. She’d just broken up with her whiny boyfriend. I was crushed afterward when she acted like our make-out session hadn’t happened. But I was a big girl and didn’t make a thing of it. “*Mostly* deliberate.”

“Interesting.” Betty got up and sat beside me. The sudden rush of her scent made me dizzy. In the background, King Princess was singing about being chill. “Let me see your hands.”

I showed her. She gently rubbed my fingers and palms, sending frissons through my whole body.

“These fingernails are *not* regulation, young lady,” she sternly teased.

Crap. I’d forgotten to trim them. An apology died in my throat and became a moan when she put my fingers in her mouth and started sucking on them. But a tiny voice way in the back of my head was screaming, *Ack! You do not know where my hands have been!*

“I’ll be honest.” She whispered in my ear like we were in the middle of a crowded bar and not alone in the back of the limo. “I’ve wanted to do you since I laid eyes on you.”

“I wanted that, too,” I breathed.

And then she was kissing me. Deep-throating me with her cool tongue. I was losing my mind at the smell of her, the taste of her. But I was paralyzed, afraid to do anything lest I lose control.

Betty pushed me back against the seat and started kissing my neck. Lightly biting my skin.

“No marks!” I gasped. “Not where the doctor could see!”

“Have some faith,” she whispered. “You due for a mammogram anytime soon?”

“No.” Her question derailed me for a moment. Was I supposed to get a mammogram? “I’m only thirty.”

“Then no worries about the doctor.”

Betty slowly pushed my tank top up and ran her fingertips over the red lace of my bra. “Very nice.”

She unsnapped the front clip with two fingers and the fabric cups fell away. My nipples hardened in the cooled air. Goose bumps shivered down my spine.

“Even nicer,” she whispered.

There was a long pause, and I looked down at her upturned face.

“So I’m going to have my way with you now.” Her eyes were bright, hungry. “Your safe word is *red*. Use it and I’ll stop. I *promise*. Now, pillow princess time. Just close your eyes…”

I did as she asked. Her lips moved to my right nipple. Licking me, gently sucking me while she caressed my breasts with her soft fingers. Oh God, it felt so good. I hadn’t been touched in months, and maybe not quite like this in years. Gregory tried, he really did, but he either used too much pressure and hurt me or used too little and tickled me. This was Goldilocks-grade just right.

Then she started licking the curve beneath my breast and it was the perfect thing.

Suddenly, a sharp, jarring pain. A razored cut, an inch below my areola. Betty latched onto the wound, sucking hard.

“What are you—” I began, but her hand was in my pants, her fingers sliding deep into my wet flesh, and just as suddenly the pain was wonderful, oh God, it was amazing.

I gripped the leather seat, arching my back, squeezing my eyes shut tighter. Light bloomed behind my lids. “Oh God, please don’t stop.”

She didn’t stop. I was an instrument under her mastery. It was as if Betty had tapped into my own nervous system, and she knew exactly what effect her slightest finger twitch had on my keening nerves. It wasn’t until the fourth time that an orgasm slipped away like a dark fish in the water that I realized she was edging me on purpose.

“Please just let me come,” I begged.

Her finger slid to the sweetest of my sweet spots and circled. I rocketed straight into outer space. Wave after wave of pleasure, and at some point I fainted.

When I came to, I was lying limp and sweaty on the bench seat. Betty was carefully patting a medicated adhesive bandage in place on my breast. Her cheeks were rosy. When she realized I was awake, she gave me a pleased, bloody Cheshire Cat grin.

We hadn’t gotten a single drop on the creamy leather seats.

★ ★ ★

My breast was okay. Sore, but okay. The cut she had made with a razor blade got a little inflamed, but it wasn’t anything Neosporin couldn’t handle.

Two days after Betty sucked me senseless, my tongue began its gradual transformation. At first I thought the raw pits on my tongue were strange canker sores. But when the tiny teeth started growing in, I knew something much more profound was happening.

★ ★ ★

Early on, I’d thought that my meeting Betty was Gregory’s fault. Karma. I thought that with bitter certainty at first.

But later, I decided our meeting was just a coincidence. So was everything that followed. Random coincidences that just somehow counteracted the entropy of the universe and set enormity in motion.

Sort of like a freight train assembling itself on the tracks after another train full of parts exploded. Not *completely* impossible, but very, very improbable. At least as improbable as modern Jesus.

But now? I accept that meeting Betty was predestined. A cosmic inevitability. It was my first proof that gods do exist. My first proof that those gods do have a plan for us all, even if the Bible-wielding men Gregory escaped had it all wrong.

And that proof? It disrupted all the patterns.

CHAPTER 10

I'm striding up the street to Dr. Shapiro's office, my head shrouded under my hoodie and mask, squinting behind sunglasses, when suddenly I hear a man in the park across the street shouting violent nonsense.

Or he used to be a man, anyhow. He's wearing construction boots, ragged Carhartt work overalls, and a dirty gray T-shirt, all freshly spattered with the blood of the woman whose head he is enthusiastically cracking open against the curb. He howls at the sky, and I can see he's missing some teeth. Probably whatever he did for a living didn't pay him enough to see a dentist. But his skin looks flush and smooth, so much healthier than mine, and for a moment I envy him.

He stops howling and meets my shadowed stare, breaking into a gory, gap-toothed smile. The kind of grin you give an old, dear friend. I've never laid eyes on this wreck before, and the woman beneath him is beyond anyone's help. They both are. I don't want to be outed, not here, not like this, so I pretend I don't even see him and stride on.

A few seconds later, I hear the spat of rifle fire and the thud of a meaty body hitting the pavement and I know that the SWAT team just took out Ragged Carhartts. They're never far away, not in this part of town. And once they've taken out one Type Three, they don't need much excuse to kill another, even if you're just trying to see your doctor like a good citizen.

“Oh God,” a lady says. She and another fortyish woman are standing in the doorway of an art gallery, staring horrified at the scene behind me. They’re both wearing batik dresses with matching homemade masks and lots of chunky handmade jewelry. “That’s the third one this month.”

“If this keeps up, we’ll have to close.” The other woman shakes her head, looking gray-faced. “Nobody will want to come here. The whole downtown will die. Not just us. The theaters, the museums, churches—everything.”

“I heard something on NPR about a new kind of gel to keep the virus from spreading,” the first woman replies, sounding hopeful.

I keep moving. Her voice fades away. People still talk about contagion control as if it matters, as if masks and gloves and sanitizers and prayers can stop the future.

Experts said from the beginning that close physical contact and bodily fluids are the main modes of transmission. Fomites, sweat, saliva droplets. They say that the airborne risk is low, but I don’t know if I believe that. If it’s true, then how did *I* get it? Gregory still seems fine, and he was the only person I’d had that kind of contact with for weeks before I got sick. He still insists he’s got no signs of the virus in his blood. The pieces just don’t fit together.

I think the sneaky truth is, unless you’ve been living in some isolated Tibetan monastery, you’ve already been exposed to PVG, one way or another. Sooner or later, you will develop lesions on your frontal lobes, temporal lobes, and hippocampus. Those will cause a variety of antisocial behaviors, which will lead to your friendly neighborhood SWAT team putting a .308 bullet through your skull.

★ ★ ★

I wake up at 8 p.m., hours before I’m supposed to go to work, and can’t get back to sleep. So I shuffle into the living room, bring up YouTube on my TV, and start watching the latest *Dr. Kaz Chats* video while I fix myself some cream of rice. She’s having a split-screen

conversation with Dr. Amit Reddy, another virologist, from a lab in California.

“So, I know you’ve been studying the interaction of PVG with other viral infections,” Dr. Kaz says. “Can you tell us more about what you’ve been finding?”

“We’ve found some concerning interactions in patients who had existing oncovirus infections, active or latent,” Dr. Reddy replies.

“And by oncoviruses, you mean viruses that can cause tumors or cancers, right?”

The mention of cancer makes my stomach turn.

“Exactly,” nods Dr. Reddy.

“Which viruses are we talking about?”

“My lab has been looking at the interactions of PVG with human papillomavirus infections, or HPV, and the Epstein-Barr virus, or EBV. We’re most concerned about those infections because they are still extremely common, even though vaccines exist for the most dangerous strains of HPV.”

HPV? I settle on the sofa with my meager breakfast to pay closer attention to the video.

“And there are well over one hundred fifty strains of HPV,” Dr. Kaz remarks.

“Yes. So that makes creating vaccines a challenge.”

I should have gotten my HPV vaccine when I was a teenager, but my parents were weird about me getting it and kept putting it off. I guess they had trouble with the idea that I was rapidly reaching an age when I’d be having sex. Getting me the shot meant acknowledging that. When I was old enough to arrange it on my own, I was busy with college and jobs and just didn’t think about it. Right until it didn’t matter anymore.

“So, I’m going to pause here,” Dr. Kaz says to the camera. “The next little bit of the conversation might be a bit basic for my longtime viewers. But I know from people’s comments that a lot of my newer viewers are watching to try to understand how PVG affects them, and they aren’t necessarily science or med students.”

She turns back to Dr. Reddy. “Would you like to give our viewers a quick PVG 101 from a functional perspective?”

Dr. Reddy nods. “Sure, I’d be happy to cover that. So, the thing about viruses is that they aren’t real cells. They don’t have a lot of the parts that real cells have, such as a nucleus or organelles. They don’t have a metabolism—they don’t eat—so they’re not properly alive. They’re basically these tiny genetic replication machines. They have a core of nucleic acid, which can be RNA or DNA … but if you don’t know what that is, you can think of it as a genetic payload. A virus, any virus, injects its genetic payload into a cell. It takes over that cell’s machinery, reprograms it so that it stops doing normal cell things and is just focused on making copies of the virus. And because infected cells stop doing what they’re supposed to do in your body, that makes you sick.”

This is all bringing back dimly remembered biology lectures from college.

“And sometimes cells partly fight off the infection, but the virus alters their genetic structure, and these cells can malfunction and turn into cancer later on,” Dr. Kaz adds.

“Exactly.”

“Can you talk about PVG from a structural perspective? For instance, why is it called ‘polymorphic’?”

“Oh, structure is one of the things that makes this virus so interesting, and so dangerous. It’s an unusually large, complex double-stranded DNA virus. Taxonomists have tentatively put it in the Pandoraviridae family, mostly because of its size and structure. It’s the first pandoravirus known to infect humans. It carries a payload much, much bigger than it needs to for simple viral replication. We’re still trying to understand why these viruses are carrying so much genetic information, what all that information codes for, and what it means for people who get infected.”

Dr. Kaz nods. “That part is a mystery for sure! But I was hoping you could talk a little about the envelope?”

“Oh, right. That’s definitely worth discussion! Some viruses, including PVG, are covered in an envelope that’s made of fat with little spikes of protein coming off it. These spikes make it easier for viruses to attach to and attack cells. Cells communicate with each other through their antigen receptors, and the viral proteins mimic those antigens. You can think of the proteins like the lockpicks that a burglar uses to break into a house. The thing about PVG is that the different strains that were first identified had envelopes that looked very, very different from one another. Just, very different envelope and spike protein configurations.”

“Yes,” says Dr. Kaz. “And that’s why researchers have needed more time to develop a vaccine than was the case with COVID-19. With COVID, they were able to make messenger RNA vaccines that told cells how to recognize the virus’s spike proteins and stage a faster, stronger immune response. But with PVG, there are so many different spike proteins in play that it’s much more difficult to come up with a vaccine effective against all the strains.”

“For sure,” says Dr. Reddy. “When people started getting sick, we thought these were completely different viruses, but people started having the same symptoms, and once we opened up the different strains, we realized that the big genetic payloads inside were mostly the same, apart from the bits that code for the spike proteins. So we realized that we were looking at a highly adaptable virus that came in lots of different shapes. *Poly* is Greek for ‘many,’ and *morphic* is from *morph,* which is Greek for ‘shape.’”

“I might be weird,” Dr. Kaz says, “but I think of it like kids from the same family who all put on very different Halloween costumes to see who gets the most candy.”

Dr. Reddy laughs. “That’s an interesting metaphor!”

My iPhone rings, startling me.

I pause the video and pick up my phone. It’s Gregory. I press the green button to accept his video call.

He’s out someplace dark, his face lit blue and spooky by his phone screen. His sunken eyes are red and tears are streaming

down his face.

And I immediately think, *Oh God, he found out about Betty*.

“What’s wrong, honey?” I ask aloud.

“Everything’s fucked up,” he weeps. His voice is slurred. Either he’s been drinking or he’s had a stroke. Gregory’s never been much of a drinker, but he’s much too young for a stroke. I immediately assume that whatever’s happening, it’s probably Joey’s fault.

“What happened?” I ask.

“I—I l-lost my job.” He shakes his head violently, as if he can shake off reality. He’s clearly furious with himself. “I lost my cool with a client. He was such an *asshole*. I just couldn’t smile and pretend anymore. I *couldn’t*.”

He lost his job? Last I heard, his performance reviews were great and everybody loved him. How could he get fired over just one mistake? Unless this wasn’t the first and he just didn’t tell me about the others.

But I know that now’s not the time to push for details. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

My fiancé doesn’t even seem to hear me. “I’ve tried so hard to be what everyone wants me to be, and I just can’t anymore. I prayed for the strength to do it, and I can’t.”

He stops for a second, breaking down into sobbing laughter. “Joey keeps saying I’m not a man, just because I won’t do the vile shit he does. If he’s a real man and I’m not, well … I don’t want any goddamned part of being a man anymore. I just don’t. And I don’t care if God thinks that’s wrong.”

“What’s going on over there?” I’m studying his face as closely as I can. It’s difficult to see him in the poor light. But Gregory looks thin. Unwell. That could be stress, but it could be he’s gotten sick.

“It’s … it’s complicated,” he says. “I haven’t been honest with you. I wish I had been, but I was so ashamed. I’m so sorry. It feels like everything’s been a lie.”

I don’t have a clue what he’s talking about. This feels more serious than him trying to haltingly explain that he’s been cheating

on me. I already absolved him of that anyhow. Whatever this is, it cuts him to his very soul. “What’s happened? You can tell me. I won’t be mad, I promise.”

“I … I can’t.” He starts sobbing harder and mumbles something I can’t understand.

I can’t sit on my worries any longer. “Honey, have you seen a doctor? Have you been tested for PVG recently?”

“I don’t fucking have it!” he screams. “I don’t!”

And then he throws his phone, or at least it seems like he has, because the image on the screen becomes a bouncing whirl of distant lights. And then the call abruptly cuts off.

I try calling him back right away, but he doesn’t pick up. Then I text him. Wait a few minutes. No reply. Of course, if he’s just busted his phone against a wall, I might not be getting a reply for days.

Gregory needs help. I check the Homeland Security health app, but there’s no feature for summoning help for someone else. Figures.

Then I think about dialing 911. But that might summon the police just as likely as it would an ambulance. The police might just decide to shoot him if he’s too upset to follow their orders. I’d never forgive myself if I got Gregory killed.

His parents are local. We’re cordial, but not close. Always got the vibe that they think I’m not good enough for their baby boy. His mom has been a bit judgmental because I’m not much into cooking and makeup and other traditional womanly activities. And somehow they believe I’m the reason Gregory stopped going to Mass. He seems to dread visiting with them, but he does it out of obligation.

Still. Maybe they can do something? It’s late for them, but I call his mother. She doesn’t pick up, so I leave a voice mail.

“Hey, this is Erin. I just spoke to Gregory and I’m really worried about him. You might want to check on him. Hope everyone there is good. Bye.”

I end the call and sit there, thinking hard. Leaving a message for his mom doesn’t feel like nearly enough. Gregory’s always had my

back. I need to have his.

There's a route to UCC that goes within a couple of miles of Joey's house. I can swing by without making myself late. Probably. A socially distanced welfare check can't really be against the rules, can it?

So I quickly get dressed, take my medicine, mask up, and head out the door.

★ ★ ★

I get to Joey's house at 10 p.m.; I'm supposed to clock in at 10:30. I park my car at the curb and hurry up the front steps to the big old midcentury. The porch light is off, and the house looks dark, but I go up anyhow and give the door a hard, loud cop knock.

Joey opens the door. He's wearing a ratty maroon bathrobe. No mask, so I step back a few feet to be polite. Charmer that he is, he frowns at me and says, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Is Gregory here? We had kind of a weird conversation a little while ago. I'm worried about him."

Joey doesn't smell very good to me. He's got an expired lunch meat sourness to him along with the stink of cigarettes and dirty socks. I absolutely do *not* want to eat his brain. This almost certainly means something, but I don't know what.

Joey looks me up and down, grunts, and then turns back into the house to bellow, "*Gregory!*

"You're not welcome inside my home," Joey warns me over his shoulder. "Keep your goddamned plague outside."

Then he abruptly walks back into the house and heads upstairs, leaving the door open.

What the hell? I wonder.

I stand there nervously for a few moments, and then call, "Gregory? Are you there?"

He slowly emerges from the gloom of the hallway to the kitchen. Stumbles to the door, looking pale and dazed. I can smell the whiskey he's been drinking. He's barefoot, wearing basketball shorts

and an old Skillet band shirt. The shirt is an absolute tent on him; he has *definitely* lost weight.

“Oh, hey, Erin.” He scratches his face. There’s a red, blistery rash along his left cheek and jaw. I wonder if he got into poison ivy or if this is a sign of something worse. “I guess I broke my phone.”

“I’m worried about you.” Gregory doesn’t smell very good to me, either. My nose is picking up a spoiled bologna note under the overwhelming miasma of alcohol and sweat. I relax a little, realizing he’s safe being this close to me.

“Joey’s mad,” he replies. “You shouldn’t be here. I didn’t ask you to come here. I didn’t invite you.”

He doesn’t look or sound angry. He sounds almost absentminded, like these are thoughts that have just distantly occurred to him.

I feel like I’m having a conversation with a sleepwalker. I want to hug him, slap him, do *something* to shake him out of whatever this is, but I know I shouldn’t touch him. “You were very upset. What else was I supposed to do?”

“You could have left me alone,” he replies blankly. “I think maybe you should just leave me alone for a while. I prayed to God and He said we shouldn’t be together anymore.”

“You what?” I pause, the meaning of his words sinking in. He’s praying again, and he really thinks he’s been talking to God? I feel sick. “Are … are you breaking up with me?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He scratches his face again and squints out at the dark sky. “It’s late. You gotta be at work, right? You should go now. Don’t be late for work.”

“Gregory, this is really weird—”

“Go to work!” he snarls.

Then, just as abruptly, his face crumples into abject grief and he starts weeping again. “I’m so sorry. But you need to go. I’m setting a boundary, okay? You need to go.”

I don’t know what to do but back up slowly. Something is clearly, desperately wrong with Gregory. I know PVG can affect different people in different ways. Sometimes it’s purely a brain infection. Dr.

Kaz says that's been happening more and more because newer PVG strains snagged genes from varicella-zoster, the chickenpox virus, and they can much more easily infect the spinal cord and use it as an escalator into the brain. It's been happening so much that epidemiologists are talking about a whole new Type. The virus is learning more new tricks all the time.

Maybe something bad is happening to the parts of Gregory's brain that control emotional regulation. But I'm no doctor. I can't tell what's really happening with him.

Can our five years together really just end like this?

Not with a bang, not with a whimper, but just a drunk, absentminded *meh*?

No. This isn't the way things were supposed to go. This isn't how I imagined our story would end. We were supposed to get a house. Start a family. We were supposed to grow old together. Die together as gnarled octogenarians, holding hands in the same deathbed while our loving grandkids and great-grandkids sit around us, weeping.

My mind is full of supposed-tos. Obligations. Expectations. Deep down, did I ever genuinely want any of the future I imagined with him? Or was it all simply what I thought I was supposed to strive for as an American woman?

Did I even ever really want kids? Did I, honestly? Even if it was possible or prudent after PVG's ravages, did I want to destroy my damaged body even more in pregnancy for the sake of small strangers I'd be responsible for? Responsible for literally decades? An endlessly stressful responsibility that, if I failed to do it well, would result in exactly the same kind of distant relationship I'd had with my own family, so that I'd inevitably die alone and dissatisfied, no matter what future I'd envisioned?

Do I—whoever I am *now,* not who I was before everything changed—really want this indifferent, inebriated man more than I want Betty? Even if what she and I have is probably doomed to end in blood?

I feel a guts-deep compulsion to stay and fight … but what would I be fighting for now? What am I fighting against? And why does it fall to *me* to be the one to fight for our relationship and not him?

The two men here have told me in plain language that my presence isn't wanted. Could continuing to stand here arguing with Gregory be even remotely helpful? Or will Joey just call the cops if I push things too far?

"Okay," I finally reply. I feel utterly defeated. Confused. Worried. Heartbroken. "If that's really what you want, I'll go. I respect your boundaries. But if you change your mind, I'm here for you. Call me later if you can. Please."

"Okay. Bye." Eyes unfocused and downcast, he shuts the door.

I take a deep breath. Hopefully he'll realize what he's done. And maybe he'll come around. All I can do now is go back to my car and try to focus on my shift at work.

CHAPTER 11

“Do you find yourself having any unwanted thoughts or violent fantasies?” Dr. Shapiro asks.

“Of course not.” I try to sound mildly indignant.

★ ★ ★

Something terrible and amazing happened a few days after Betty and I had our third date. I don’t know if my memories of the event are accurate; they have the unreal sheen of dream. Of savage fantasy. The only things I know that are absolutely, incontrovertibly real are the texts I got from Betty. They’re still in the burner phone:

You’re right, the situation isn’t fair. I want things to be better 4 us. I made an appointment. Please come with me? It’s gonna hurt. I need someone 2 hold my hand.

Ok, yes I will hold your hand, I texted her back.

She replied with an address, a date, and a time after dark.

I arrived at the correct place at the right time. I don’t really remember how. She’d gotten her third-shift mechanic friend to drop by and give my car a thorough search and he’d declared it free of tracking devices. So I feel safer driving to our dates. It’s plausible I drove, parked a few blocks away, and walked. But no matter how I rack my memory, I just don’t know.

The first thing I remember is meeting her outside … what? A club? A tattoo parlor? It must be downtown. Maybe the old

warehouse district. There is loud, bass-heavy dance music that rattles my bones. I don't recognize it. People in masks and dark clothes mill on the sidewalk under neon lights. Too many people. Much too close to each other. I can't keep my distance. My nerves are frayed to sparking threads just being there.

But I find Betty, more by smell than sight. I didn't recognize her at first because she's buzzed her hair very short. Everyone here seems to be wearing black.

Conversation is impossible over the music. She smiles at me and leads me through the crowd into the dark passage between the tall brick buildings. Paved, but too narrow to be a proper alley. Twenty steps in, there is a steel staircase leading to a battered basement door in a square concrete well. It's just barely big enough for both of us. Smells like piss and garbage. The door is maroon, the old paint chipped and rust-bubbled off the steel. In a couple of places, I can see that in years past it was painted dumpster green. Otherwise it is blank. No words or numbers, nor any remainders of markings.

Betty raps a complicated rhythm on the door.

A large bald man in black jeans and a black tee over thick arms entirely blue with tattoos, clearly a bouncer, opens it just a crack. "Yeah?"

"I'm the 11 p.m.," Betty says.

"Password?" he grunts.

"Cabeza."

The bouncer opens the door wide and Betty pulls me in after her. We are in a brutalist space, a bare concrete corridor lit by stark halogen bulbs in caged metal shades bolted to the ceiling. The harsh odor of chlorine bleach burns in my nose.

"This way," the bouncer says, gesturing toward another steel door. "I think the doctor's ready for you."

Inside the room, three gaunt women in green surgical masks, full-face shields, and green scrubs stand under bright surgical suite lighting. Their hair is tucked up under disposable paper caps. They're arrayed on both sides of what looks like a cross between a

dentist's chair and an old-fashioned electric chair. Beside it are a rolling steel surgical cart with instruments laid out on a shining tray and an IV stand loaded with a fresh clear bag of some kind of intravenous liquid. The chair is padded blue vinyl, but it's upright and has sturdy leather straps. Behind it is a machine with a pressure gauge and a lot of clear plastic tubing wound around it. I'm guessing it's for oxygen or suction or something like that. There's another chair in the corner, in front of a hairdresser's sink. On the opposite wall is a white counter with a stainless steel sink—the kind I'm used to seeing in doctors' offices—with white cabinets above and below. There's a red mini fridge under part of the counter, with a biohazard symbol on it.

The walls and ceiling are gray ceramic tile, and it looks pretty new. The floor is glossy gray concrete. I'm guessing it's coated in urethane for easier cleanup. About every square yard on the floor, they've bolted large, sturdy steel D-rings in recessed plates. The air smells like disinfectant.

"Are you Betty?" asks the shortest of the three women. She's standing in the middle.

"Yes, that's me," Betty replies.

"I'm Dr. LaVoie," says the woman. "I was a licensed neurosurgeon at Cary Hospital for ten years. I hold a joint MD and Ph.D. in neuroscience from Vanderbilt University. I lost my position and my medical license as a result of my PVG diagnosis two months ago."

She gestures to the woman at her right. "This is my anesthesiologist, Dr. Gutierrez. She worked closely with me at Cary, and she became infected in the same incident that I was."

Dr. Gutierrez waves at us nervously.

"And this is our assistant, Darnelle. She was a registered nurse, and she was with us at Cary as well."

"Hey." Darnelle gives us an up-nod.

That must have been one hell of an incident, I think, imagining someone screaming and thrashing in seizures on an operating table, horrifically bleeding out all over everyone in the room.

“Due to our PVG infection status,” Dr. LaVoie says, “we are not legally allowed to perform any sort of medical procedures or body modifications. Therefore, we are not standing here in this room with you. If the authorities talk to us later, we will declare we were not here, and we all have alibis in place. But it would be much better if our names never came up at all. Do you understand?”

Betty nods. “I do.”

“That said,” Dr. LaVoie continues, “prior to our respective loss of licenses, we all had excellent reviews from supervisors, colleagues, and patients.”

“I know of your work,” Betty says. “I’m good.”

Dr. LaVoie turns slightly toward me. I can’t read her expression because of the glare of the light on her face shield. “I see you’ve brought a friend. Who appears to be a Type Three?”

“Yes, I’m her friend,” I reply. “And I’m … the other thing, too.”

“While we encourage each patient to bring a friend or loved one for moral support,” Dr. LaVoie says, “due to the nature of the procedure, we discourage the presence of Type Threes. *Highly* discourage it.”

“Well, she’s my plus-one,” Betty says, tightening her grip on my hand. “She’s who I want with me.”

“What can we do to make this safer for her?” I ask.

“You’ll need to be restrained. Do you consent to that?”

This makes me incredibly uneasy, and I want to say no, but I look at Betty and it’s clear she wants me to agree so we can all get on with whatever this is. “Sure, uh, yeah.”

Dr. LaVoie steps on a foot pedal that apparently opens up the intercom. “Paul, would you please bring a chair and restraints for my appointment’s companion?”

“Will do,” he replies over the speakers. “Be there shortly.”

“Darnelle, would you please prepare Betty?” the doctor asks.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Darnelle leads Betty away from me and takes her to the hairdresser’s sink. Pulls electric clippers out of the drawer and starts

shaving Betty's close-cropped hair down to the scalp.

At that moment, Paul the bouncer comes into the room with a padded white plastic folding chair, a coil of strong galvanized chain, and a rig that looks like a straitjacket and a BDSM harness had a baby. My stomach flutters.

Paul unfolds the chair and sets it on the floor about a yard from the blue vinyl chair. "Miss, I'm going to need you to sit down here."

I do as he asks.

"You gonna hold her hand?" He sets the heavy chain on the floor.

I nod.

"Righty or lefty?" He shakes the kinks out of the rig and straightens the brown leather straps.

"I'm right-handed."

"Cool." He puts the harness on me. The straps crisscross my chest and shoulders and buckle somewhere on my back. He cuffs my left hand behind my back but leaves my right hand free. Then he cuffs my ankles to the legs of the chair. I hear and feel him attach a chain to the back of my harness and padlock it tightly to a D-ring somewhere on the floor behind me.

"You able to breathe okay?" he asks.

"Yes, I think so." I try shifting around and can't really move anything besides my right arm. The buckles are unreachable. I absolutely hate being this helpless.

"Cool, cool." He gives me a chummy pat on the shoulder and leaves the room.

Meanwhile, Darnelle has finished with Betty, whose scalp is bare and wet. It smells like Darnelle washed her head with some kind of strong antibacterial soap.

They sit Betty down in the chair. Dr. LaVoie starts hooking Betty up to an IV in the crook of her right arm while Dr. Gutierrez goes to the mini fridge and pulls out a liter-size Nalgene bottle that is mostly filled with what looks like blood.

"What's in the drip?" Betty eyes the bag full of clear liquid uncertainly.

“Saline solution, a sedative, and a painkiller,” LaVoie replies.

“What’s in the bottle?”

“O negative from a Type Three along with a different analgesic and an antibiotic,” Dr. Gutierrez says. “This looks like a lot, but we’re going to need you to drink the whole thing. If it’s any consolation, this is going to get you very, very high.”

Betty chugs the bottle. When she finishes, her eyes are so dilated they’re nearly black, and she’s practically vibrating. Darnelle secures her into the chair, strapping down her arms and legs, her torso. I can just barely reach out and hold her left hand.

They put a neck brace on her to immobilize her head, and Dr. Gutierrez clamps a steel band around her cranium, just above her eyebrows. She bolts the brace to a plate on the headrest of the chair. The neck brace has a dip beneath her jaw, I’m guessing so she can still speak without moving the rest of her skull.

“This might feel weird. Might sting a bit at first.” Dr. Gutierrez starts swabbing a clear gel all around her head, just above the band. It’s got a strong alcohol and chemical odor that makes me afraid I might sneeze inside my mask. As the anesthesiologist works, Betty squeezes my hand hard, looking scared.

I’m starting to figure out what’s happening here, and I don’t know how I feel about it. Am I touched that she’s taking a major step in our relationship? Am I heartened that she’s making this sacrifice as a commitment to me? Or am I horrified that my desire, my hunger, carries this dreadful, bloody cost for her?

“Hey,” I say to her. “What’s your favorite animal?”

“Siberian tiger,” she replies, her voice a little thick.

“What can you tell me about tigers?” I ask.

“They’re the biggest of the big cats, except for ligers. Absolute units. They’re endangered outside zoos. There’s only, like, five hundred or so left in the wild.” Her voice slurs more and more as she speaks, and her eyes start to flutter a bit.

“Can you feel this?” Dr. Gutierrez raps on a section of Betty’s gelled scalp with a little silver hammer. It reminds me of a meat

tenderizer.

“Feel what?” Betty’s eyes are still hugely dilated, but now seem completely unfocused.

“She’s ready,” Dr. Gutierrez says to Dr. LaVoie.

Dr. LaVoie nods and adjusts the bright overhead light to shine directly on Betty’s skull. “Get the suction online, and then please assemble the Gigli saw.”

Oh shit, this is really happening. “Is … is she still supposed to be awake?”

“Yes, we need people awake for this.” Dr. LaVoie pulls on a fresh pair of purple nitrile gloves as Dr. Gutierrez taps a pedal on the floor to start the suction machine. “I need to make sure I’m not going in too deep, and if I do, we need to rapidly diagnose the damage situation.”

Dr. Gutierrez carefully pulls a burred steel cord out of a plastic wrapper. It’s maybe a foot long. The burrs gleam in the light, sharper than razors. She attaches each end to T-shaped metal handles that remind me of wine openers, except each has a slim hook at the end instead of a corkscrew.

She offers the assembled surgical implement to Dr. LaVoie, who takes it and begins to calmly and expertly saw into Betty’s head using the steel band as a cutting guide. Quick shoe-shining motions that neatly sever flesh and bone. Dr. Gutierrez deftly suctions away the blood and bits of tissue. I notice for the first time that the suction tube deposits the gore into a clear plastic jar on the floor. They’re not about to waste those precious, infectious fluids.

Dr. LaVoie breaks through into the brain cavity. Pale cerebrospinal fluid washes out along with the blood. Dr. Gutierrez gets it all.

My heart is pounding. The smell of Betty’s brain is heavy in the air. Not even a smell, exactly, but a feeling. Electricity. Magnetism. It draws me. I strain against my harness, but it is good and tight.

I am bound, and I must watch. I must witness this. This is for me. Because of me. This is my present. This is my future. This is my fault.

Betty’s eyes roll up and I can see she’s shivering. Shuddering.

She opens her mouth and moans. Her moans babble to words in some alien language, guttural coughs and groans and rasping, and I cannot understand the syllables but I can feel the message deep in my core and it’s bending my mind, crushing my consciousness, as if this cursed prayer she’s uttering has cast us both into the event horizon of the star-devouring monster at the core of a distant galaxy.

It is wonderful. It is horrible. I start laughing and laughing and can’t stop myself, and soon I know no more.

CHAPTER 12

“I was wondering about something,” I say, as Dr. Shapiro begins to copy the contents of her survey into the exam room computer.

She stops typing and gives me a wary look. “Yes, what is it?”

“My prescription supplement. I feel okay, you know? But my memory’s … not what it should be. I’ve been forgetting dumb stuff at work. I think I should be thinking better. I think I would, if I could have a little more?” I’m choosing my words as carefully as possible. My tongue feels thick, twitchy.

I don’t want to tell her how badly my memory is slipping. I can’t talk about the cravings I’m feeling. I especially can’t mention wanting more energy, because nobody in charge wants someone like me feeling energetic.

I wonder if there’s a sniper watching from behind the mirror on the wall. Has he tightened his grip on his rifle? Are gas canisters waiting to blow in the air-conditioning vent above me? My skin itches in dread anticipation.

Dr. Shapiro hedges. “Well, I know there’s been a shortage of raw materials these days.”

I swallow down my impatience and worry. The capsules are 98 percent cow brains, for God’s sake. Probably they can squeeze a single human brain for thousands of doses. And there are so many miscarriages these days. I can’t imagine the pharmaceutical companies are actually running short of anything.

“Could you check, just the same? Could you ask for me?” I sound meek. Pathetic. The opposite of hostile. That’s good.

She gives me a pitying look and sighs. The mirror doesn't explode in gunfire. Gas doesn't burst from the vents.

"I'll see what I can do," my doctor says. "But I'll probably need to rerun your metabolome analysis to justify any increase."

Ugh. That means yet another blood draw and pee test. Worse, it means having to awkwardly poop in a box in front of the nurse. I can only hope that my fluids and excrement reflect a real biochemical need.

I try to believe she'll come through for me.

★ ★ ★

I go home. I take my bovellum capsules with some Mott's apple juice. I rinse my mouth out with peroxide and don't look at my tongue. I rub salve on the places my clothes have rubbed raw, and I climb naked into my bed. Sometime later, the alarm goes off, and I rise, shower, dress, and drive to work in darkness.

My shift is dull clockwork, until just after gray drizzling dawn, when one of the new tech leads comes in to talk to my coworker Jorge about some of the emergency server protocols. I haven't seen this young man before; he's wearing snug jeans, and the sleeves of his black polo shirt are tight over biceps tattooed with angels and devils. His sandy hair is cut close over a smooth, high-browed skull. He starts talking about database errors, but he's thinking about a gig he has with his band on Friday night, and it suddenly hits me not just that *I know what he's thinking* but also that I know because I can smell the sweet chemicals shifting inside his brain. The chemicals tell me his name is Devin.

I am filled with Want in the marrow of my bones. I am filled with Need from eyeballs to soles. I excuse myself and hurry out into the mutagenic morning and text Betty on the burner.

It's early for her. But she answers me right away. We agree to meet that night. It's been a while, but it's her turn to host.

★ ★ ★

I sleep fitfully. When my alarm goes off, I call in sick, shower, dress, and check the burner. Betty's texted a cryptic string of letters and numbers for my directions. And so I drive out to a hotel we've never visited before, drinking Aquafinas the whole way. It's a dark old place, once grand, now crumbling away in a forgotten corner of downtown. I wonder if she's running short of money or if the extra anonymity of the place was crucial to her.

Still, as I get out of my car and double-check my locks in the pouring rain, I can't help but peer out into the oppressive black spaces in the parking lot, trying to figure out if any of the shadows between the other vehicles could be lurking cops or Homeland Security agents. The darkness doesn't move, so I hurry to the front door, head down, hands jammed in my raincoat pockets, my stomach roiling with worry and anticipation. I avoid making eye contact with any of the damp, tired-looking sex workers smoking outside the hotel's front doors. None of them pay any attention to me.

My phone chimes as Betty texts me the room number. I take the creaking, urine-stinking elevator up four floors. My pace slows as I walk down the stained hallway carpet, and I pause for a moment before I knock on the door of room 512. What if the watchers tapped Betty's phone? What if she's not here at all? My poised hand quivers as my heart seems to pound out *A trap—a trap—a trap*.

I swallow. Knock twice. Step back. A moment later, Betty answers the door, wearing her Audrey Hepburn wig and a black cocktail dress that hangs limply from her skeletal shoulders. It's appalling how much weight she's lost; her eyes have turned entirely black, the whites permanently stained by repeated hemorrhages.

But she smiles at me and I find myself smiling back, warmed by this spark of real human feeling. I have to believe that we're still human. I *have* to.

In the background, a Savages track is playing on her phone. Jehnny Beth is singing about adoring life while Ayse Hassan's bass

line strolls seductive and menacing. I'd forgotten how much I love this album.

"You ready?" Betty's question creaks like the hinge of a forgotten gate.

"Absolutely." My own voice is the dry fluttering of moth wings.

She locks the door behind me. "I'm sorry this place is such a pit, but the guy at the Holiday Inn started asking all kinds of questions, and this was the best I could do on short notice."

"It's okay." The room isn't as seedy as the lobby and exterior led me to expect it to be, and it's got a couch in addition to the queen-size bed. Betty has already covered the couch and the carpet in front of it with a green plastic tarpaulin. Her stainless steel spritzer bottle leans against a couch arm.

"Want some wine?" She gestures toward an unopened bottle of Yellow Tail Shiraz on the dresser.

"Thanks, but no … I couldn't drink it right now. Maybe after."

She nods. "There's a really good Italian restaurant around the corner. Kind of a *Goodfellas* hangout, but everything's homemade. Great garlic bread."

Betty pulls off the wig. Before she got the virus, she apparently could grow her thick chestnut hair clear down to her waist. I've never seen hair that long except in pictures. Her bare scalp gleams pale in the yellow light from the chandelier.

The scar circumscribing her skull looks red, inflamed. I wonder if she's been seeing other Type Threes. I quickly tamp down my pang of jealousy. We never agreed to an exclusive arrangement. And maybe she just had to go to the hospital instead; she told me she's got some kind of massive tumor on her pituitary.

She looks so frail. I can't possibly begrudge her what comfort she can get. I should just be grateful that she agrees to see me when I need her.

And, oh sweet lord, do I need her tonight.

Betty pulls me down for a kiss. Her hands are icy but her lips are warm. She slips her tongue into my mouth, and I can taste sweet

cerebrospinal fluid mingled with her saliva. The tumor must have cracked the bony barriers in her skull. Before I have a chance to try to pull away, my own tongue is swelling, toothed pores opening and nipping at her slippery flesh.

She squeaks in pain and we separate.

“Sorry,” I try to whisper. But my tongue is continuing to engorge and lengthen, curling back on itself and slithering down my own throat. I can feel the tiny maws rasping against my adenoids.

“It’s okay.” Her wan smile is smeared with blood. “We better get started.”

She kisses the palm of my hand and begins to take my clothes off. I stare up at the tawdry chandelier, watching a fly buzz among the dusty baubles and bulbs. When I’m naked, she slips off her cocktail dress and leads me to the tarp-covered couch.

“Be gentle.” She presses a short oyster knife into my hand and sits me down, the plastic crackling beneath me. I nod, barely keeping my lips closed over my shuddering tongue, and spread my legs.

With a slow exhalation, Betty settles between my thighs, her back to me. She’s a tiny woman, her head barely clearing my chin when we’re seated, so this position works best. Her skin is already covered in goose bumps. The anticipation is killing both of us.

I carefully run the tip of the sharp oyster knife through the red scar around her skull; there’s relatively little blood as I cut through the tissue. Betty gives a little gasp and grips my knees, her whole body tense. The bone has only stitched back together in a few places; I use the side-to-side motion she showed me to gently pry the lid of her skull free.

She moans when I expose her brain. It’s the most beautiful thing I could hope to see. Her dura mater glistens with a half-inch slick of golden jelly. Brain honey. When I breathe in the smell of her, I feel my blood pressure rise hard and fast.

I set the bowl of skin and bone aside and present the knife to her in my outstretched left hand. With a flick of her wrist, she slits the vein in the crook of my arm and presses her mouth against my

bleeding flesh. I wrap my cut arm around her head and pull her tight to my breast.

I open my mouth and let my tongue unwind like an eel into her brainpan. It wriggles there, purple and gnarled, the tiny maw sucking down her golden jelly. It's delicious, better than caviar, better than ice cream, better than anything I've had in my mouth before. Sweet and salty and tangy and perfect.

The jelly gives me flashes of her memories and dreams: She's been with other Type Threes. She's helped them murder people. I don't care. I keep drinking her in, my tongue probing all the corners of her skull and sheathed wrinkles of her brain to get every last gooey drop.

I can control my tongue, but just barely. It's hard to keep it from doing the one thing I'd dearly love, which is to drive it through her membrane, deep between her slippery lobes. But that would be the end of her. The end of us. No more, all over, bye-bye.

A little of what my body and soul craves is better than nothing at all. Isn't it?

My arm aches, and I'm starting to feel light-headed on top of the high. We're both running dry. I release her, spritz her brain with saline, and carefully put the top of her head back into place. She's full of my blood, and already her scalp is sealing back together. We've done well; we spilled hardly anything on the tarp this time. But my face feels sticky, and I've probably even gotten her in my hair.

She daintily wipes my blood from the corners of her mouth and smiles at me. Her skin is pink and practically glowing, and her boniness seems chic rather than diseased. "Want to get takeout from that Italian place after we get cleaned up?"

"Sure." I'm probably glowing, too. My stomach feels strong enough for pepperoncinis.

I head to the bathroom to wash my face, but when I push open the door—

I find myself in Dr. Shapiro's office. She's staring down at an MRI scan of somebody's chest. The monochrome bones look strange,

distorted.

“There’s definitely an organized mass above your ribs and spine. It’s growing fast, but I can’t definitely say it’s cancer.”

I’m dizzy with terror. How did I get here? What mass? How long have I had a mass?

“What should we do?” I stammer.

She looks up at me with eyes as solidly black as Betty’s. “I think we should wait and see.”

I back away, turn, push through her office door—

And I’m back in a rented room. But not the downtown dive with the dusty chandelier. It’s a suburban motel someplace. Have I been here before?

The green tarp on the king-size bed is covered in blood and bits of skull. There’s a body wrapped in black trash bags, stuffed between the bed and the writing desk. Did I do that? What have I done?

Oh God, please make this stop. I have to lean against the wall to keep myself from tumbling backward.

Betty comes out of the bathroom, dressed in a spattered silk negligee. I think it used to be white. There’s gore in her wig. Her eyes go wide.

“I told you not to come here!” She grabs me by my arm, surprising me with her strength. In the distance, I can hear sirens. “They’ll be here any minute—get away from here, fast as you can!”

She presses a set of rental car keys into my palm, hauls me to the door, and pushes me out into the hallway—

And I’m stepping into the elevator at work.

Handsome blond Devin is in there. A look of surprised fear crosses his eyes, and I know the very sight of me repels him. His hand goes to his jeans pocket. I see the outline of something that’s probably a canister of pepper spray. It’s too small to be a Taser.

But then he pauses, smiles at me. “Hey, you going up to that training class?”

I nod mechanically, and try to say, “Sure,” but my lungs spasm and suddenly I’m doubled over, coughing into my mask. When did simply breathing start hurting this much?

“You okay?” Devin asks.

I try to nod, but there’s bright blood dripping from my mask to the floor. A long-forgotten Bible verse surfaces in the swamp of my memory: *Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth.*

I look up and see my reflection in the chromed elevator walls—my face is gaunt, but my body is grotesquely swollen. My knit blouse is stretched tight over a huge curving lump that takes up most of my back. It itches. I don’t even recognize the clothes I’m wearing. I must have bought them to accommodate this huge, strange mass, but I don’t remember buying them. I’ve turned into some kind of hunchback. How long have I had this mass?

Instead of the pepper spray, Devin’s pulled his cell phone out. I can smell his mind. He’s torn between wanting to run away and wanting to help.

“Should I call someone?” he asks. “Should I call nine one one?”

The elevator is filled with the scent of him. Despite my pain and sickness, the Want returns with a vengeance. Adrenaline rises along with my blood pressure. My tongue is twitching, and something in the enormous hump on my back, too. I can feel it tearing my ribs away from my spine. It hurts more than I can remember anything ever hurting. Maybe childbirth would be like this.

Betty. I need Betty. How long has it been since I’ve seen her? Oh God.

“Call nine one one,” I try to say, but I can’t take a breath, can’t speak around the tongue writhing backward down my throat.

“What can I do?” Devin touches my shoulder.

And the feel of his hand against my bony flesh is far too much for me to bear.

I rip off my mask. Rise up under him, yank his mask down. Grab him by the sides of his head. Kiss him. My tongue goes straight

down his throat, choking him. He hits me, trying to shake me off, but as strong as he is, my Want is stronger.

When he's unconscious, I let him fall and then hit the emergency stop button. The Want has me wrapped tightly in its ardor, burning away all my human qualms. The alarm is an annoyance, and I know I don't have as much time as I want. Still. As I lift his left eyelid, I take a moment to admire his perfect chocolate iris.

And then I plunge my tongue into his eye. The ball squirts off to the side as my organ drills deeper, the tiny mouths rasping through the thin socket bone into his sweet frontal lobe. After the first wash of cerebral fluid I'm into the creamy white meat of him, and—

Oh God. This is more beautiful than I imagined.

I'm devouring his will. Devouring his memories. Living him, through and through. His first taste of wine. His first taste of a woman. The first time he stood onstage. He's at the prime of his life, and oh, it's been a wonderful life, and I am memorizing every second of it as I swallow down the contents of his lovely skull.

When he's empty, I rise from his shell and feel my new wings break free from the cage of my back. It's agony, but it's also a pleasure, like finally being able to scratch a nagging itch. As I spread the membranous, fluid-dripping wings wide in the elevator, I realize I can hear the old gods whispering to me from their thrones in the dark spaces between the stars.

And … something else. I hear a faint, insistent whisper in the castle manor. My masters in the voids of the cosmos wouldn't approve of me listening to this other, barely audible voice … but they don't know about it. Only I can hear it. My special secret. It wouldn't hurt to see what it's about sometime, would it?

I grin at myself in the distorted chrome walls. Everything is clear to me now. I have been chosen. I have a purpose. Through the virus, the old gods tested me and deemed me worthy of this holiest of duties. There are others like me; I can hear them gathering in the caves outside the city. Some died, yes, like the ragged man who must have recognized me as a fellow Archivist on sight. But my

Becoming is almost complete. Nothing as simple as a bullet will stop me then.

Earth is ripe, human civilization at its peak. The other Archivists and I will preserve the memories of the best and brightest as we devour them. We will use the blood of this world to write dark, beautiful poetry across the walls of the universe.

For the first time in my life, I don't need faith. I know what I am supposed to do in every atom in every cell of my body. I will record thousands of souls before my masters allow me to join them in the star shadows, and I will love every moment of my mission.

I can hear the SWAT team rush into the foyer three stories below. Angry ants. I can hear Betty and the others calling to me from the hollow hills beyond the city. Smiling, I open the hatch in the top of the elevator and prepare to fly.

PART TWO
DOLORE STIMULATUS

The first form is darkness,
the second desire,
the third ignorance,
the fourth is the excitement of death,
the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh,
the sixth is the foolish wisdom of flesh,
the seventh is the wrathful wisdom.
These are the seven powers of wrath.
They asked the soul,
Whence do you come, slayer of men …
Where are you going, conqueror of space?

—The Gospel of Mary Magdalene

CHAPTER 13

According to the textbook we're using this term in Psychology 450 (*The Future Therapist's Guide: Theory and Practice* by Garza-Fieldman), the most important thing you can do to ensure a solid working relationship with your clients—beyond, you know, staying current on research and therapeutic techniques and making sure you don't stink when you go in the room—is to *know yourself*. And at first blush, that sounds like a straight-up platitude, like the LIVE, LAUGH, LOVE canvas on the greige living room wall of your cousin Becky's suburban condo.

But knowing yourself matters. It matters if someone is pouring their black little heart out to you in a session and something they say disgusts you, or irritates you, and that negative emotion catches you by surprise, and in your surprise you let your true feelings show on your face. Because then they see your frown or narrowed eyes and they withdraw or shut down. And congratulations, you've just undone weeks or possibly months of work. So you're back to the Sisyphean task of building trust and rapport all over again, just because for one second you flinched when your client admitted that when he was thirteen he liked to fuck the goats on his mom's Ann Arbor farm.

While I am not a psychologist or a social worker, my clients still have a host of mental illnesses and neurodiversities. And so I have tried my level best to stare my own shames, bigotries, kinks, and squicks square in their beady little eyes so I can maintain my professionalism and not inadvertently destroy the positive feelings my clients have about paying their hard-earned cash to see me.

And yeah, I get that people refuse to understand that I am in fact a professional, even though I'm a top earner at one of the most exclusive, expensive, progressive houses in the world. My parents would not understand it. Everyone eventually asks what my father thinks of what I do for a living. As if anyone's father is supposed to have veto power over a grown woman's life when her teens are a full decade past, a vanishing dark spot in her rearview mirror. When they ask—assuming they're not clients, of course—I just smile sweetly and say, "Aw, honey, does your daddy still run *your* life?," and that usually shuts them up right quick.

Some people press on. They want to know how I can look my own family in the eye. How I can *justify* this lucrative, completely legal job to them.

And so I tell them the truth: my immediate family lost any care about what I do with my life when I was a sophomore in high school. I was away from home at regional band tryouts. My father decided to pick up a gun during a fight with my mother he'd started because he was sure she was cheating on him. (She wasn't.) He shot her between the eyes, then went upstairs and murdered my little sister and little brother because he believed they weren't really his biological children. (They were.) While their corpses cooled, he spent the next hour writing up an aggrieved, entitled, chest-thumping suicide note detailing why he had no possible choice but to slaughter his own family. And then, as is statistically typical of men like him, he blew his own brains out.

I tell the people who question my life choices that my father would have murdered me, too, had I been home. But I wasn't, because I'd chosen to play saxophone in marching band to have a reason to be gone on Friday nights when Dad drank. All the neighbors and his coworkers said my father was so nice and considerate and they were just *shocked* at what happened … but I know my mother and my siblings did not die surprised, because violence was *always* on the table behind closed doors. I had worked hard to build an alternate life at school, and so I was safe a hundred miles away

when Dad finally made good on the threats Mom had willfully ignored for years because, she always insisted, “Your father means well.” (He didn’t.)

That’s my story of why I survived: because of my individual choices and my hard work. And it’s fine to be skeptical about that. So let’s take a deep dive there. Maybe there’s no justice in this universe and my being alive today is just dumb shithouse luck. And if that’s the case, then there’s no point in moralizing over anyone’s life choices, is there?

My father’s choice to murder my family resulted in me having to spend the next two years in the home of my uncle Robert, who is a pastor at a Baptist church. And he loves Christian moralizing in exactly the same way my father loved Scotch. They were both narcissists cut from the same rotten wood. It surely comes as no shock that he disrespects women and women’s work in equal measure, nor that I got the hell out of there as fast as I could.

If anyone asks, I tell them that my uncle’s opinion matters less to me than a skeet-soaked rag dropped by a client.

And that leads back to this: Most people insist that what I do, despite it being the very oldest profession, is in no way professional. To them, my job is just lying on my back and taking a whole lot of cock.

First, it’s not just cock. Okay, yes, when I started out, it was cock all day, every day. Most straight cis guys, when they pay to see a courtesan, they want to have sex as many times as possible during the time they’ve paid for. And, fine, that’s to be expected. *Occasionally* I would get a married couple who were looking for a rental unicorn for a threesome.

But I got a little bored with all that, so I talked with our madam, Em. She helped me make some key contacts at lesbian bars and such. Women are certainly an underserved population at traditional brothels, so she was keen to see if we could attract them. My first couple of female clients had a great time, and word spread. We also

did some online advertising targeted at bi women, and that worked out pretty well.

So now a good portion of my clients are lesbians or bi women who need that itch scratched. I can butch down or femme up, depending on what my client's into. Sometimes women come to me because they're still figuring out their sexuality. They just don't know how to seduce or be seduced by another woman—and hell yes I help them with that if they ask. Some of my bi clients tried on their own but got shut down by local lesbians who're shitty with women who still sleep with men. Others are on the autistic spectrum, and they find dating confusing and frustrating. I've even had a few straight-identifying women come to me because they'd been watching girl–girl porn and got curious … and they figured I was safer than a hookup at a lesbian bar. And of course, I'm a sure thing. Those ladies are fun, but a little exhausting, because they want to try All The Things.

What just a few of my clients want most is to have someone to talk to. They come in thinking it's sex that they want, but it's intimacy they're starved for. Or they've got uncomfortable thoughts rattling around in their heads and they just need to get them out in front of a sympathetic ear.

A paid-for friend isn't ideal, but it's better than what a whole lot of people in this city have. And if you don't have insurance, I'm *way* less expensive than a psychiatrist. It helps that Em is a pretty damn cool boss and—shockingly, I know!—she actually values us for our individual interests, educations, and skill sets. (It also helps that the guy who owns the brothel is a rich eccentric who took a shine to Em's ideas and lets her run things the way she likes.)

About a year before the pandemic, the state blew up politically over human trafficking. Voters finally decided to legalize sex work so women and children being held in slavery wouldn't have to be afraid of getting locked up if they went to the police. That's the story, anyhow. I'd been working awhile on the down-low as a dominatrix and cam girl and was skeptical that trafficking was really as bad as

some people were saying. Em went to local BDSM munches and play parties to recruit me and all the other girls I knew at the brothel, so none of us had typical sex worker backgrounds.

But my apartment neighbor, Allegra, is a psychiatric mental health nurse, and she very politely ripped me a new one when she overheard me scoffing about the whole thing in the laundry room to another neighbor after the election.

“If you don’t know anyone who’s been trafficked, then all that means is you and your friends have been lucky. Sheltered. And you should thank God for that,” Nurse Tesfaye scolded me. “When I worked downtown, the police called us in after they raided a warehouse. Twenty women, men, and children. Naked, chained to the floor. Starved, tortured, drugged. Raped and sodomized repeatedly. Every day, I work with people who’ve been sold over and over, and they are going to struggle with that physical and psychological trauma the rest of their lives.”

I was a little pissed off when she called me “sheltered.” Wanted to be all “Hey, lady, my father mass murdered my family, so don’t lecture *me* about trauma.” But I also decided in the moment that it wasn’t really about me, anyhow, so I kept my mouth shut.

The Pink Rose and the rest of the first legal brothels to go online have been extra careful to prove that their employees are 100 percent there of their own free will and are safe for customers. So, unlike our counterparts in Nevada, we do get full medical and dental after we’ve worked at the house for three months. (Due to new laws, we’re employed as hourly or salaried workers and not independent contractors. Base pay can be pretty low, but we also get tips and bonuses. My base pay is not low.)

Considering how many people have come down with polymorphic viral gastroencephalitis and how easily PVG can spread through body fluids, having us work as independent contractors without health coverage would have been criminal negligence. At *least*. People get charged with murder for spreading that shit. The moment the FDA approved an emergency vaccine, Em brought in a nurse

practitioner and lined us all up to get our shots. It wasn't so bad. Some of us got a little feverish and light-headed, and our arms ached for a couple of days, but that was about it.

Legalized prostitution is hot like Kīlauea, so reporters are dying to get dirt on the brothels. Just one disgruntled courtesan could bring down one hell of a sticky load of bad press. So it makes sense that Em puts effort into ensuring we're happy with who and what we're doing. We're even allowed to keep guns and Tasers hidden in our playrooms in case a client decides to go all Jack the Ripper on one of us. I never wanted a gun for reasons that should be painfully obvious, but it's good we were given that choice.

I fully agree this is a news honeymoon. The brothels will be passé back-page stuff soon enough. As boring as adult trafficking victims were ten years ago. As boring as my family's murder was a month after they were cremated. It'll all be downhill from here.

I mean, this is still capitalism, right? Filthy lucre fucks up everyone's best intentions. But for now, this is by far the best customer service job I've ever had. Even when I agreed to let an aging B-movie star piss on me in the shower, it was still way better than phone tech support. (And I even got my Blu-ray of *Chainsaw Hobos from Mars* autographed without having to wait in line at Comic Con!)

So I'm always trying to use my education in my work, and always trying to know myself better. Most of the time, that's been a rewarding journey.

But three weeks ago, I learned some things I wish I hadn't. Everyone in this whole damn brothel would wish that, too, if they knew.

CHAPTER 14

Gregory wasn't a steady regular, but he'd seen me a few times before and had behaved himself perfectly well. And he'd passed our background check with a gleaming gold star. He was shy, polite. Wrestling with gender dysphoria. After a couple of sessions, it was clear he hated existing in a male body. He'd been fronting hard to be who he thought people expected him to be, and it was taking an incredible toll on him emotionally and psychologically. But because his family is (in their own special suburban ways) just as shitty and regressive as my uncle Robert, the notion of identifying as someone other than a man made him straight-up panicky. I got the impression he had a steady girlfriend, but when I asked about her, he clammed up hard.

He mostly wanted me to peg him. Mostly. I kept condoms handy just in case.

Because he seemed scared to death that someone might photograph him, I set things up so he could use the online system to schedule and pay for sessions, rather than having to arrive in person to negotiate scenes. And, more to the point, he could use the secret biometrics-equipped side door that's actually a block away and goes underground. Because of all the news vans camping in the parking lot across the street, the owners wanted to make sure that celebrities could come and go without harassment. But ordinary people stand to lose, too, if the flocking paparazzi stick cameras in their faces, so we offer back passage as a courtesy to good returning clients.

If Em or the receptionist had seen Gregory walk through the front door, or if the security guard hadn't been half asleep when he let Gregory go inside … well, none of this would have happened.

I thought I knew all about PVG. The CDC agreed to work closely with brothels in our state to limit the possibility of on-site transmission—thus our swift vaccinations. They'd been sending us weekly informational videos and pamphlets. Big nerd that I am, I read it all, and more.

Viruses have always fascinated me. I mean, think about it: They work by giving an unsuspecting cell new assembly instructions. It's just … new information. That doesn't seem so bad, does it? And yet it can be a complete horror show.

This is what I knew about PVG: Within a week of transmission, an infected person typically gets a mild to moderate headache and some nausea. Maybe some diarrhea. For some people, that's all that happens. After a few days of taking it easy, they're back to normal. For a few others, the infection takes root in their brain instead of their guts. They suffer delusions and mood changes that may or may not attract the attention of medical professionals or law enforcement. (Trust me, our society tends to assume that dangerously psychotic white men are just having a bad day until they make it a bad day for the whole house, too.)

But for others the headache turns into the most awful vise-grip migraine they've ever had. Thirty minutes to a day after that, they start puking up blood, then their stomach mucosa. Most everyone who gets that sick ends up in the hospital.

When a PVG patient gets out—*if* they get out and don't straight-up die—their digestive system is fucked all to hell. They can't eat most foods. Their body has trouble growing and healing. The enzymes their DNA uses to repair itself quit working like a tech bro after a four-whiskey lunch.

Sunlight, X-rays, cigarettes, liquor, food preservatives, cosmic rays … anything that can even slightly damage your DNA becomes a real problem. Patients' skin breaks down and their bodies sprout

tumors. Their brains begin to degenerate. Sooner or later, they develop lesions on their frontal lobes, temporal lobes, amygdala, and hippocampus. Without daily medication, those lesions inevitably lead to a variety of hallucinations, delusions, and antisocial behaviors. And that's when police snipers tend to get involved.

PVG patients are identified by type. And some people get really hung up on that, you know? They don't understand that the type taxonomy is just a way for the medical community to try to make sense of what they're seeing. It's not like Dr. Moses went up the mountain and came down with tablets inscribed by God. It's all descriptive, not prescriptive. The virus is changing all the time and it doesn't give a shit about categories.

But anyway, Type Zeros—who seem to be more theoretical than real right now—are completely asymptomatic carriers. Type Ones are the folks who get sick but just need over-the-counter drugs and a little rest and are fine. They're maybe-probably still contagious if the stars are right. Twos may or may not be contagious, but they definitely need supplements containing the proteins found in fresh human blood. Same thing for Type Threes, but they need the proteins found in fresh brains. Type Fours—that category is pretty new—are the ones who mainly get brain infections and end up needing antipsychotics or antiepileptics. It's all pretty gruesome, but honestly not really that much more scary than a disease like Ebola, or even drug-resistant syphilis.

The CDC's overall message was "This is an incurable, complex, life-changing infection, but it can be managed just like HIV," so most of us in the brothels figured we could get our shots and just roll with it.

The brothels closed for a while at the beginning of the pandemic, but as everyone got restless (and as the CDC decided the quick-prick rapid antigen tests were reliable), the state let us take customers again. But obviously we aren't supposed to service anyone who's infected with PVG. Our vaccinations are insurance against being infected through random sneezes and handshakes on

the street; there is no approved protocol for preventing transmission during physical intimacy. People have to pass a PCR antigen test and carry documentation proving it or the front door staff will turn them away. It's not just on the honor system; every prospective client has to pass a test. If someone claims our test generated a false positive—and, to be fair, Type Zeros and a lot of Type Ones don't even know they are infected—the staff smiles and tells them to come back with test results from their doctor.

I didn't even realize until later that Gregory was infected, even though I knew right away that something was seriously wrong with him.

Our playrooms are set up basically like a hotel room, except with a door in the front and the back. We courtesans come in through the front door, which locks and has a foyer beyond with a sink, mirror, etc., so we can do last-minute checks of our costumes and makeup. In the main part of the room, there's a bed and sofa—both have waterproof covers that are easy to disinfect—and *maybe* a bondage chair or frame. BDSM is tricky and we charge a lot more for it; the extra disinfection protocols are a huge pain. Because of the risk of someone getting a cut or bleeding welt, we're supposed to stick to light-impact play, light bondage, etc. Watersports and blood play are forbidden, obviously. Whatever dildos or other toys we use have to get wiped down with alcohol and go in the autoclave afterward. Silicone is our friend.

The back entrance is for our clients, and it opens into a tiled dressing area with toilet facilities and a shower with sturdy handholds. The CDC says that washing with soap and water helps prevent PVG transmission, so clients have to clean up before they play. A lot of them like sexytimes in the shower, and none of us enjoy blowing a dude with swamp ass, so everyone wins.

I wasn't surprised to hear the water running and to find the room filling with steam when I got down to the room for Gregory's session. I slipped off my green silk robe, draped it over the arm of the sofa, and sashayed over to the shower.

“Hey, Gregory, how’s it going?” I called, hoping to not startle him.

He didn’t answer. I figured he just couldn’t hear, so I rounded the corner to the stall door, ready to knock on the shatterproof glass.

And stopped dead.

The glass was fogged up, so I could only glimpse him as a blurry beige shape against the white tiles … but something was Definitely Not Right. My mind split in two as instinct raised my pulse and screamed *Get away!* while the rational parts tried to stay calm and make sense of what I was seeing. Had he come here with a little person who was riding him piggyback as he showered? No, that wasn’t one of his kinks—bringing someone else to a solo session wasn’t allowed, anyway—and the asymmetrical hump I saw rising from his upper back wasn’t really shaped like a clinging person.

I took a deep breath and tried again. “Gregory, you okay in there?”

No response. He was in the corner of the shower, pressing his face and chest against the tiles and swaying back and forth. Moaning faintly.

I gripped the handle and eased the door open just the tiniest bit so I could get a clearer look at him. Assess the situation. Use my brain and my education and not jump to any damn conclusions.

My next thought was that he had some kind of massive infection under his skin, like the epically pus-filled humps that Dr. Pimple Popper airs. But my eyes focused a bit more and I saw that his skin was stretched tight over distorted shoulder blades and bulging ribs that looked like they had separated from his spine in places. Good Christ, how could he stand up and walk with that going on? Whatever was causing this ugly hump was pushing out from far inside him.

Cancer? It had to be cancer. How could it have gotten so bad so quick? It had been only six weeks since I’d seen him last, and he’d been perfectly fine then. What kind of tumor grows that fast?

I stepped away from the shower. Turned to the pile of street clothes he’d haphazardly dumped on the dressing room chair.

Looking for clues, like maybe a bottle of prescription medications or a clinic wristband or *something*.

The “something” I found was a boxy black pistol in a green nylon shoulder holster.

“God damn it,” I whispered. This is a concealed carry state, but clients are forbidden to bring firearms into a brothel. Gregory *knew* that. What was he thinking?

I carefully pulled the pistol free of its holster, holding it gingerly as if it were a dead rat. Just because I hate guns doesn’t mean I haven’t taken time to learn the basics, like whether the safety is on and whether the thing is loaded. Enough of the other girls brought in firearms for self-defense that I figured it would be stupid not to learn enough to protect myself.

It was a Glock nine-millimeter. The safety was on and the magazine was full.

God damn it.

I went back to the shower door and slapped the glass with my hand. “Gregory!”

He jerked in surprise and turned away from the corner.

“Savannah, help me,” he moaned.

I backed up as he pushed the stall door open and stumbled out. And couldn’t help gasping because, Jesus Christ, I wouldn’t have recognized him except for the colorful Saint Michael tattoo on his left pec. His face, chest, and arms were painfully gaunt, like he was a day or two from starving to death. And his eyes were both mottled black and red from eight-ball hemorrhages.

“What … what’s happened to you?” I stammered.

His face contorted in grief. “This is not my body! This is not the Becoming that God promised me!” He started weeping. “The other angels are massing in the hills. I … I can hear them all. I am called to my mission, but I don’t want it!”

Ah, shit, I thought. He’d had some kind of break from reality, or was delirious, or both. People knew I was running BDSM scenes in here; screams wouldn’t raise any eyebrows. My panic button was

over on the side of the bed. If I hit it, two very large men with Tasers and Mace would be down here in less than a minute. But Gregory looked fragile. An electric shock might kill him.

More to the point, he stood between me and my panic button. Was I more likely to be able to dodge past him, or was it better to stay very still and use what I'd learned in class to try to deescalate the situation? In that moment, my mind absolutely refused to consider using his gun. No. I would *not* do that.

I decided it was better to try to calm him down first, and then phone for help.

"Gregory, deep breaths, buddy. Can you tell me what's happened?"

His expression twisted into a rictus of agony and he went into a half-crouch as though he were having a back spasm. "Oh God! It's happening. Savannah, I didn't know where else to go. Help me. I brought a gun … Please kill me!"

Fucking hell. "What? No—"

He started screaming and fell to his hands and knees.

That huge, twisted hump on his back was spasming, shuddering. Then the skin above his right scapula split with a spurt of dark blood and something amber and watery, and I realized *something was breaking free and clawing out of him*.

"Savannah, please…" He sounded like he could barely breathe.

I couldn't move, couldn't speak. Frozen like a rabbit. A leathery blade sliced up through the split in his skin, followed by a long finger of bone and a fringe of pale tissue. Then another blade sliced out through the skin on the left side of his back. The sound of bones crunching and skin ripping made bile rise in my throat.

"The gun. Please. I won't be able to stop…" His voice was changing as he spoke. Deeper. Stronger.

I stopped focusing on the gory confusion of his back and realized that his whole body was altering itself. Bloody teeth drooling out of his gasping mouth. His face rearranging itself into something that

didn’t look exactly human anymore. Bones lengthening. Muscles and sinews stretching.

He screamed like a raptor as his wings broke free. Wings. Holy fuck. They spread seven or eight feet wide, tough membranes stretched tight over thin bones that looked strong as titanium. The air stank of blood and amniotic fluid.

I stumbled backward into the rattling locker as the winged creature Gregory had become rose and towered over me.

“I was bound, though I have not bound,” he intoned, his mouth full of long, jagged teeth like you’d see on a deep-sea anglerfish. “I was not recognized. But I have recognized that the All is being dissolved, both the earthly and the heavenly. When a soul has overcome the third power, it goes upward and sees the fourth power, which takes seven forms. The first form is darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth is the excitement of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the sixth is the foolish wisdom of the flesh, the seventh is the wrathful wisdom. These are the seven powers of wrath. And so I ask the chosen soul, *Whence do you come, slayer of men?*”

“Gregory, I—I don’t understand.” I was suddenly remembering passages about angels in the Bible. They weren’t hot dudes with halos, like you see in Renaissance paintings. They always had to tell mortals “Fear not!” because they were *fucking terrifying*.

“Whence do you come, slayer of men?” He stepped toward me on long legs lightened for flight. “Wilt thou take thine sword? Or wilt thou shirk thy duty?”

The chair with his clothes and the pistol was just a few feet out of reach to my right. “I … I don’t—”

He reached out and touched my forehead with taloned fingers.

Instantly, my mind filled with images of winged, predatory beings like Gregory falling like a curse from God upon men, women, and children across the world. Ripping their necks out and drinking their blood. Tearing their skulls open with talons or drilling into their eye

sockets with grotesque burred tongues. Devouring their brains, their memories, their very souls.

And in this vision I turned my face to the heavens, and suddenly I could hear the old gods whispering to me from their thrones in the dark spaces between the stars: *Follow thy nature, and thou shalt be rewarded.*

“We Archivists shall preserve the worthiest souls,” Gregory told me, pulling my mind back to the playroom. “We shall use the blood of this world to write triumphant praises to our ancient lords. Thy duty is to cull the unworthy so that those inferior souls shall not distract us from *our* duty.”

The vision had shaken me to my very core. I’d seen the wholesale slaughter of the entire human race. Was it happening now? Or was what I’d seen some glimpse of the future? Part of me had accepted that the vision was an absolute truth right up there with rain being wet and the sky being blue. But the rest of me was resisting the inevitable and thinking, *Oh hell no*.

So I lunged sideways for the gun, flicked the safety off, and unloaded the entire ten-round magazine into Gregory’s chest. It would have taken a very special talent to miss him at that distance. (I didn’t.)

Every bullet I fired into his flesh was nothing short of exhilarating. And when I saw his body crash lifeless to the tiled floor, I came so hard I lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 15

I woke in the quarantine wing of a place called Greenlawn. Something between a hospital and a jail. Not much fun. Taser-toting guys in hazmat suits from Homeland Security and the CDC interrogated me about what had happened, and what I remembered. I've done enough research on traumatic memory loss to fake it like a champ. After a few hours, I had them convinced that I didn't remember anything other than sickly-looking Gregory lunging at me when he came out of the shower.

The suits left, and then it was just a matter of waiting out ten days of quarantine in my cell.

It turns out my neighbor Nurse Tesfaye works there now. Apparently her Greenlawn salary was a lot nicer than it had been at the downtown mental health hospital. She came by every once in a while to chat for a bit. Say hi and all. Sometimes bring me a pudding or juice box. Nice of her. I got the impression that they were keeping her pretty busy, so she was deliberately taking time out to sit with me for a few minutes.

I never did come down with any PVG symptoms despite inhaling a fine mist of Gregory's blood. Clearly I *had* to have gotten infected, but their tests told them over and over that I wasn't. Once the week-plus had passed with no symptoms and no change in my viral titer, Greenlawn released me. Em gave me another week off with pay, which was a clear sign she was eager to keep me from quitting.

She told me that Slade, the security guard, insisted he never saw Gregory. Even after they showed Slade the camera footage of him

clearly buzzing Gregory through, he stuck to his story and seemed genuinely confused and distraught about it. Slade tested negative for drugs, passed a polygraph, and there was no evidence he'd been bribed, so Em speculated that maybe he had some sort of brain seizure. She did fire him, obviously.

Neither she nor anyone else batted an eye when I told them I was thinking of buying a pistol of my own and bringing it to work. Everyone is very sympathetic and understanding. Some of the girls are telling me to buy three or four. You know, keep one hidden in the playroom, one in my car, one at home, etc.

I'm still not sold on firearms. They're certainly effective. But if I got one, it wouldn't be for self-defense. I don't have anything to fear from those who have Become. As far as they're all concerned, I'm one of the Chosen, too; they won't touch me.

I am a Type Five, and I am not alone. We all received our apocalypse assembly instructions without any headaches at all.

Which isn't to say that all this has been free of unpleasant effects. Ever since I woke up in the hospital, it's been hard to make myself come. And I've tried everything: my hands, my Hitachi, dildos, clients, a random hookup with a guy I met on Tinder. And yeah, Tinder guy did make me come, eventually … but only when I slit his throat with a razor after *he'd* come and was snoring away in the back of his camper van.

It was just as glorious as it was with Gregory. The kind of white-light, ascending-to-the-heavens ecstasy the saints used to sing about. Came so hard I sprained my back. And when I woke up, I thought, *Yeah: blades are more my style*.

Fortunately, Tinder guy won't be missed. And yeah, I know that for sure. I can glance at someone and know whether they'll Become or if I must save them for Archiving or if they're just a big ol' waste of time and oxygen for everyone except the *slayers of men* like me.

The biggest revelation from all this, at least for me personally, isn't knowing how and why the world will end, and that it will end in another three years at most.

It’s knowing why my father killed himself.

I mean, I thought I knew his reason before. Having read his suicide letter, I knew it wasn’t because he was sorry he’d just slaughtered his own family, because there is not a single shadow of regret in those three pages. I figured that he was too chickenshit to face the cops, the trial, and prison. Death was the easy way out.

But if murder is the purest joy I can find in this world, and if murder is just me following my nature like the old gods say … well, I surely inherited my nature just like I inherited my blonde hair.

So now I know, deep in my bones, that when my father shot my mother between the eyes, he came harder than he ever had when he’d been balls-deep in her pussy. He’d come harder than he ever had with a prostitute or with his own left hand. And when he murdered my little brother and sister … maybe he came even harder.

He killed himself because he realized that the neighbors had already heard gunshots and called the cops, and once he was in custody, he’d probably never be able to experience that kind of existence-affirming ecstasy ever again. Thus the angry, embittered tone of his letter.

I could be wrong about that. But it *feels* right. It’s just more satisfying to think that he died out of a deep, soul-wrenching despair instead of garden-variety cowardice.

★ ★ ★

I saw another Type Five at the grocery store the other day. Nice-looking middle-aged lady. Real grandmotherly type. But we both knew who we really were from the gleams in our eyes. We gave each other a little nod and smile and went on with our shopping.

The old gods still whisper to me in my dreams, but honestly they can all go pound salt. I’m not doing this for them. But if humanity’s doomed, and I know it is, I’m gonna get it while I can.

CHAPTER 16

I killed a Catholic monk, can you believe it? I didn't even know we had any living in this city. He and I connected on one of the dozen hookup sites I'm catfishing on. I agreed to meet him a block from his monastery. Which I would have never even known was there, otherwise, even though I've driven past the side street it's on a thousand times. I had this idea that monasteries are all away from cities, like in isolated vineyards or deep in the woods or on picturesque mountaintops. But nope. His is in Wexney, east of downtown, where the old money lives. If those monks ever have to pay property taxes, they won't be able to afford to stay in the neighborhood.

His name was Michael. Thirtysomething, not bad looking. Bald on top, the rest of his sparse brown hair cut close to his scalp. Skinny. Quiet and intense. Smelled like castile soap and incense. Nervous. I got the impression he didn't do this much. I figured we'd head to one of the fleabag motels a couple miles away … but he actually snuck me inside the monastery and took me back to his cell! That's some serious brass.

So, I mean, I *had* to let him fuck me. Seems only fair to reward that kind of bravery, right? A lot of religious guys, they think they're kinky, but really they're so vanilla you just want to pinch their little horndoggy cheeks and tell them how adorable they are. Michael was a legitimate freak, though.

For the appetizer, he wanted to watch me strip and then ritualistically defile his religious objects. I hadn't ever fucked myself

with a crucifix before, frotted on the spine of an eighteenth-century leather-bound Latin Bible, or used a rosary as anal beads, but there's a first time for everything. I got the feeling that he was going through a bit of a *thing* with his religion, psychologically speaking. Perhaps experiencing some catastrophic rupture of faith. But it wasn't my job to counsel him.

Then, for the main course, he wanted to fuck me in the ass while I was on my hands and knees on the hard wooden floor whispering the Lord's Prayer. Because of course he did. And we'd negotiated ass play ahead of time. He spent a while rimming me first, reaming my starfish with his soft tongue. And that was fun.

But when he undid the fly of his cassock and levered his dick out, I had me a *concern*. Dude was hung. Hung like *damn*. Thick as my wrist, long as my forearm. The shape of it reminded me of a megamouth shark minus the fins. He had seriously missed out on a career as a porn star.

When we were messaging each other, Michael had refused to send any dick pics, and I'd assumed that meant he was embarrassed because he thought it was too small. As usual, I'd brought an assortment of really good lubed condoms, so I had something to fit him. And it's not like I don't keep myself in shape for accommodating large clients. Still. He was a lot bigger than I was expecting.

And he didn't go nearly as slow as I'd asked him to. Just grabbed me by the hips and shoved right in. For a hot second there, I worried I might have to make an awkward, limping visit to the ER later. Rectal tears aren't anything to fuck around and find out about; you don't want to go septic down there.

Fortunately, having a real, live woman to rut into was so exciting that he came pretty quickly. So I didn't have to bite the proverbial pillow for very long. Only got through the prayer twice before he let out a low, stifled moan and his latex-sheathed cock spasmed and spat inside me.

He got up, stumbled backward onto his cot, and passed right out afterward. So I got my straight razor out of my overnight adventure bag and had my dessert. Made quite a mess but didn't make any noise, which was key. And then I put on some rubber gloves, checked the cell for hidden cameras. Discovered he wasn't that kind of perv. Kind of a shame; I would've liked a video souvenir for later. Yanked the stained bottom sheet out from under his corpse and pulled it off the bed. Gathered up the used condom and uncleanable rosary, tidied up my DNA and fingerprints from everything else with some bleach wipes. Black-bagged the most incriminating stuff for disposal elsewhere. And then I was gone.

I felt a little guilty about killing Michael. He'd been all over the world, studied at the Vatican. Definitely an Archival-quality mind. Definitely would be missed by his order. He wasn't the kind of person I was supposed to be getting out of the way.

I'd broken the rules. Broken them pretty hard, to be honest.

But getting freaky in a monastery? Getting plowed by his *kaiju* of a cock, even though it hurt like a motherfucker? It got me going something awful. It wasn't just Michael's blood I got on the sheet; I'd smeared pussy juice all over it first. Dripped a glistening puddle of girl goo on the unforgiving floor I had to wipe up.

After all that, I wanted to come, damn it. I'd earned my nut. And if I didn't kill him for it, I would've had to do someone else that night, so it might as well be him.

★ ★ ★

But tonight, Michael comes to me in a dream. I'm standing in a barren field and he floats in the air above me in a Jesus pose, his arms outspread to the gray, storm-threatening sky above us. Barefoot in his cassock, the gash in his neck gaping like an aroused vagina. Spent, cum-crusted dick flopping through his fly like a hound's lolling tongue. Just as I'd left him.

"Thou hath transgressed." He stares down at me with filmy, dead eyes.

“I have.” I know it won’t do me any good to pretend otherwise. We both know what I’ve done.

“Thou must do penance,” he tells me. “The old gods demand it.”

“How?”

“Thou must turn thine knife to a new task.”

The monk is wreathed in fire now, as if he is a holy sign and I am an Old Testament prophet witnessing him. “Thou must protect She who is most precious to the future.”

“Who is She?” I squint against the light of his blazing corona. “How will I know?”

“Thou shalt recognize Her as the worthiest of the worthy,” he replied. “And thou shalt guard Her as you would guard a chest of gold. And thou shalt care for Her and mend Her as you would thine own flesh.”

CHAPTER 17

When I wake up after the dream, my first thought is, *Mending flesh? I need to learn a lot more medical stuff.*

Second thought: *Right, like I have time to add online nursing courses to my lively psychology class, murder, and fucking schedule.*

But then it hits me. It's so obvious, it's beautiful. Archivists don't have to read books or watch YouTube or go to school to gather other people's thoughts. They have a far more direct, effective method. While I'm not their Type, I'm still one of them. I've been transformed and selected by the gods the same as them. So why can't I borrow their techniques if it's in service to my mission?

My new instinct tells me that I absolutely can.

★ ★ ★

I go to the hardware store as soon as it opens and buy a handheld circular saw with a three-inch blade. The unit is small enough to stash in my adventure bag, which is a nice leather diaper bag I Scotchgarded the hell out of. Most of the time it just looks like a big shoulder purse to other people. Nothing to worry about.

When I get back to the apartment complex parking lot, I put on my mask and clip a double-edged boot dagger inside my jeans, at the small of my back, under my shirt. Put a thumbtack inside my left shoe, under my arch. Foot pain reliably makes me cry; I'm a big ol' baby when it comes to bastinado and falanga.

I'm weeping and probably nicely red-eyed by the time I get up the stairs to the second floor.

Nurse Tesfaye answers the door on the third knock. I knew she wasn't working today; she mentioned she has Thursdays and Fridays off when we chatted in Greenlawn. But I've still gotten a little bit lucky that she's home.

She opens the door a couple of inches and looks at me warily over her mask. Her security chain is on. This lady certainly isn't stupid. The air from her apartment is wonderfully fragrant with fresh, hot coffee.

"What's up, Savannah?" She pulls her pink terry cloth robe closed over her purple satin nightgown.

I put on my best anguished face.

"I … I need to talk to you about Dr. Sallow." I'm stammering like I'm embarrassed and freaked out. "He … he, um. He found out I work at the Pink Rose and he came to my place last night. Forced me to do things. He said he'd say I failed my virus test and get me fired if I didn't do what he told me. I'm … I'm scared he's going to come back, and I don't know what to do."

It's all lies, but her eyes go wide. Bingo. I *knew* this was a push button for her. Sallow was always professional with me, but he stared at my tits a little too long. Exuded just enough of a secret-creeper stink that my gut said accusing him would seem plausible to her. She had told me that she's a mandated reporter, so there was no way she'd blow this off.

"Oh my goodness. Please, come in." She unlatches the chain and opens her door.

I step inside and she shuts the door behind me. Nice place. Her apartment is laid out as a mirror image of mine. Framed Jamaican and Italian art—mostly vivid watercolors of the ocean, mountains, and forests—adorns her walls. She's got a flat-screen smart TV, IKEA coffee table, and light blue couch set up almost exactly like I've got my furniture situated.

She was watching something on YouTube when I interrupted her. The image is paused on an Asian woman with electric blue and pink hair who's wearing a black T-shirt that reads "Not That Kind of

Doctor.” A moment later, I recognize the channel: Dr. Kaz Chats. A lot of the other students in my classes watch her videos, and I’ve caught a few when I’ve had time. Interesting stuff.

“I didn’t really know who to talk to.” I gently set my adventure bag down on the floor. “I’m scared the police won’t believe me.”

“You can talk to me.” She locks the door and puts the chain back in place. “You want some coffee? My grand-auntie in Kingston just sent me a care package. The really good beans we Jamaicans keep for ourselves and don’t export.”

“That’s so nice of you. Yes, I would love that.”

She steps past me toward her kitchen and I smoothly draw the dagger and drive it deep into the side of her neck.

Nurse Tesfaye gives a startled, strangled gasp—she can’t really scream, since I’ve just severed her trachea along with her carotid artery—stumbles, half-turns toward me, her eyes wide. Shocked. Accusing. *Hurt.*

The orgasm shuddering through me has me pretty distracted, but I shove her down to the floor, yank the knife out, and press my mouth down on her jetting artery. Drinking her lifeblood deeply.

At first, nothing happens. But then, memories creep in. Memories that aren’t mine, and which *can’t* be hers. I’m racing across the frozen wilderness of Germania in Arminius’s company, screaming, my sword raised to slaughter the Roman soldiers scattering in fear before us. I’m on the deck of a clipper ship beneath the creaking sails, seasick and sunburned, elated at finally seeing green on the horizon but desperately missing the lass I left behind in Glasgow. I’m picking grapes on the hills outside Rome, gossiping with my sisters as we enjoy the cool breeze. I’m stepping off a Sicilian tramp steamer in Asseb with my carpetbag, surveying the bustling port before me, praying that this strange, hot country with its relentless sun can become my new home. I’m tending goats in the scrublands at the foot of the majestic Mabla Mountains, pausing to shake a pebble from my sandal. I’m holding my big brother’s strong,

calloused hand as we step off the boat in Kingston. “This is our new home, *wenidi liji,*” he tells me. “Auntie is waiting for us!”

Ancestral memories. *This* is what the Two Archivists are recording from those they harvest. Thousands of lives are an intoxicating, immersive whirl in my mind. But it’s not what I need. Not what I came here for.

I force a finger down my throat and vomit her blood onto her nice clean carpet. The memories lose their hold on my consciousness, fade. I dig the tack out of my shoe, crawl to my adventure bag, and fumble out my new circular saw. Find an outlet to plug it in. I know I have to work quickly.

As I cut into her skull, tiny bits of blood, scalp, and bone fly everywhere. The air fills with the stink of scorched bone. Her short hair is getting caught in the blade and making things extra messy and awkward. I should have brought a clipper with me and shaved her head first. But it’s too late to worry about that now. I’ll remember to do it next time.

I get the top of her skull off and slice open her dura mater with my box cutter. It is, indeed, a tough mother. But I get it peeled off and expose her raw brain. About three pounds of wrinkled gray matter glistens before me. It has a faint raw meat smell to it when I get close. Mostly, the air stinks of her blood and my vomit now. The aroma of coffee is a faint reminder of a pleasant, civilized world I no longer operate in.

I don’t know enough about neurological anatomy to know where the memories of medical procedures she’s learned are likely to be stored. I know these will be mostly explicit memories … but maybe implicit memory is involved as well? That might involve neurological clusters all over her brain.

Shit. Three pounds of brain is a *lot*. Will I have to eat the whole damn thing to get what I’m looking for?

No way to know. I just have to do this. So I dig my fingers into her gooshy neocortex and shove the fatty, gelatinous flesh into my mouth. It’s disgusting, like thick boogers, and my throat closes,

refusing it, but I've committed to this, so I force it down. Focus on mechanically scooping and swallowing.

Her memories flood into me—and almost immediately I'm regretting this terrible, utterly damning life choice I've made.

I'm reliving her childhood memories of Jamaica, Miami, and Cleveland. The little boy stepping off the boat in her blood-memory must be Gianni Tesfaye, her papa. He loved her and his other children so, so much. A kind, gentle, strong man who protected his children as they grew into happy, assured adults.

And I'm on my hands and knees on the sticky bloodstained carpet, ugly-crying my black little heart out. Because I thought a childhood like hers, a father like hers, was just fairy tales. Men like him don't exist outside Disney movies. I was sure of it. But her memories of her sweet, attentive, patient papa show me that my cynical conviction was a lie. Good fathers *do* exist. For other children. Other women. Not me.

I wail my heartbreak and fury into the polyester fibers. My siblings and I were *cheated*. Utterly, horribly cheated. I want to curse the gods who let this happen, but the ancient entities who are my masters now had nothing to do with the affairs of mankind. They wait impassive in the darkness between the stars. Waiting for me to get my shit together and get on with it.

So I crawl back to her skull and keep eating her brain, like a rat gorging itself on poisoned bait.

I can vividly imagine her ghost standing beside me, watching me defile her corpse. So vividly, I wonder if it's real and not my imagination at all.

Her ghost furiously shakes her head. "What goddamned, dirty, low-down white bullshit is this? I was nothing but good to you, and this is how you do me?"

I'm sorry, I want to say. *This was a mistake.*

"You lie about being raped! You think you some kind of feminist, and you *lie* about that! To *me*. Do you have any goddamned idea

how harmful that is? People would hold you up as an example. ‘Oh, *she* lies, so they *all* lie about that.’ Damn you *forever*.”

Now I’m reliving her horror at going to the warehouse where they found all the trafficked men, women, and children. Women she saw as abused, exploited innocents. Not women like me.

“Nobody else would have known,” I tell her. “I just said that to you because it was easy.”

“Easy, huh? Easy to get me distracted and sympathetic? To come to me crying your white woman tears?” She spits for emphasis. “Just so you can betray and murder the one Black friend you had in your entire life.”

That hits a weak spot in my armor, and I don’t have a comeback. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“People are counting on me! And now I can’t help anyone ever again. Not *ever*. Your … your moral relativism is disgusting. And so is your work.”

“Seriously?” I rock back onto my heels to glare at her. “My working in a brothel is *not* the problem here. There’s nothing wrong with having a lot of consensual sex. There’s nothing wrong with being good at sex, or being paid for sex. There’s nothing wrong with giving other people pleasure. Oldest profession in the world, babe. If you wanna hate the game, that’s fine, but don’t hate us players. We’re human beings the same as nurses are. No better, no worse. You get just as many body fluids in your face in a day as I do.”

“I wasn’t referring to your sex work, but okay. What *do* you think the problem is, Savannah?”

“I think the problem is I’m selfish.” I stare down at the red, open cavity of her skull. “I’m descended from a long, long line of selfish people. People who murdered and enslaved other human beings when they damn well knew better, but they constructed elaborate justifications for themselves. Codified those dishonest justifications into laws. And I was raised up in a world of their creation.”

I pause, swallowing against a stray tatter of dura mater that seems to have gotten stuck in the back of my throat. “That’s why I

hunted you. That's why I killed a nice woman who befriended me against her better instincts, instead of going out and finding a stranger. That's why I killed a strong, accomplished Black woman who was pretty much the living embodiment of the American Dream instead of going in search of a scrub. You looked *consumable*. And maybe I was still pissed off that you called me 'sheltered' that day."

I take a deep breath. "You'd have died soon anyway. An Archivist would take you. Tear you open. It wouldn't worry about making your death quick."

"Is that *justification* actually supposed to make me feel better?" She puts her fists on her hips. "Is that *actually* supposed to absolve you of what you've done here?"

"No. I guess not."

"How is this any different than the murder that got you in trouble with your gods? How is this not another transgression?"

"Your death serves them. I needed an education to do what they want, and you've given me one."

She shakes her head. "What you call 'selfish'? I would call it predatory. I would call it evil. Just straight-up evil."

I shrug, feeling profoundly ashamed and numb at the same time. "You could call it that, yes."

"So your eyes are opened," she says. "You know better than to do what you're doing. Are you going to do the decent thing and stop?"

"I don't know," I reply. "It depends on what the gods will let me do."

"The gods." Looking disgusted, she pokes at my discarded dagger with the toe of her slipper-shod foot. "You have the means to stop anytime you want to."

I stare down at the knife.

"Oh. *That* kind of stopping myself." I pause. "As a mental health care nurse, aren't you supposed to, you know, *not* tell people to kill themselves? Isn't that just a little frowned upon in your profession?"

"You ended my career as a nurse about an hour ago. Since then, I have had no professional obligations with regard to medical ethics,"

she replies coldly. “So the question remains: What are you going to do?”

“I think I’m going to think about it.” I look at her body, and a fresh wave of regret washes through me. “I think I’m going to cover you, and I’m going to clean up some. Maybe have a cup of that coffee you offered me.”

She rolls her eyes and throws up her hands. “Fine. Eat my brain. Drink my coffee. By all means, make yourself at home. But don’t expect me to stay here. I have better things to do with my afterlife than haunt the mind of a psycho killer who betrayed me on my day off.”

The shade of Nurse Tesfaye, the ghost of the woman who tried to be my friend, turns away from me and fades from existence. I am alone with her corpse. The sudden silence makes me nervous.

My belly is distended, aching from all the brains I’ve shoved down my throat. Frankly, I’m feeling more than a little sick. Kind of very, very sick, actually. But her skull isn’t empty. Did I get what I was looking for? Can I keep from vomiting until I’m sure?

I can’t keep reliving her memories. They’ll destroy me. They need to be at a distance, filtered.

So I imagine her memories as a box of index cards. It appears in my hands: pink plastic with a flip top, just like the box I had in high school. Almost completely filled with white, ruled four-by-six cards. I flip through. *Antibiotics. Wound irrigation. Emergency first aid. Tracheotomies. Suturing.* Yes. The things I most wanted in my head are here. Even better: Now I also know the boundaries of my medical ignorance. I know what I *don’t* know. And on one card, I have the address of a handsome young ER doctor named Craig, if I want to fill in those gaps later.

Elated, I run to her bathroom to puke her brains up.

CHAPTER 18

Once I'm sure I'm done purging, I pull the purple satin comforter off her bed and wrap her body in it. Just to give her some dignity in death. Just so if the maintenance guy finds her, he doesn't have nightmares forever. Not that it will be any nicer for the forensics detectives, or the cleanup crew. God. The poor cleanup crews. I never thought of them before.

Devouring Allegra Tesfaye's brain has altered me. Some of her memories are mixed in with mine now. It's hard to tell them all apart. I'm … I'm not sure I know myself anymore.

I'm covered in her blood and fluids. Everything I'm wearing is incriminating garbage now. I get out a big plastic trash bag, strip, and sack my clothes and shoes. Take a long hot shower in Allegra's bathroom. Use her expensive boutique soap and shampoo. Towel off, then raid her closet and drawers for a new outfit.

Her clothes fit me surprisingly well. Even her sneakers. The red blouse I've picked out is pretty tight across the bust, but that's probably a feature. Nobody ever really expects a serial killer with nice tits.

I step back into the living room and survey the disaster I've made. Christ. The spinning saw blade threw blood and brains on the walls, onto the ceiling. Bits of nurse are *everywhere*. I need a better tool for next time. Maybe a machete? My arm will get tired, but it's probably good cardio.

This is where I should get to work with wipes and bleach to get rid of the evidence … but I'm absolutely bone-tired now. And something

in the back of my head tells me that the cops are about to be way too busy to work this case in a timely fashion. If ever.

I pour myself a mug of the fragrant coffee and top it up with coconut creamer from her fridge. Sit down on her very lightly blood-speckled, sky-colored couch and wake up her TV. Hit the Play button to watch *Dr. Kaz Chats* while I sip my coffee.

"… so I definitely have big news to share with your viewers," says a nerdy woman in a black T-shirt. "Do you want the good news first, or the bad?"

Dr. Kaz smiles at her. "Which does it make the most sense to talk about first?"

"The good, for sure." She clears her throat. "So, you know how there's been a massive uptick in false negative test results the past month, even with PCR? We figured out why that's happening."

"Is there a problem with the new batches of tests?"

She shakes her head. "The tests seem to be fine. As far as we can see, they work exactly the way they're supposed to. That's the good news."

The YouTuber's smile has faded. "So if it's not the tests…?"

Black Tee makes a rewinding motion with her hands. "Let me back things up a little for your viewers. PVG has been classed as a pandoravirus. And pandoraviruses, as a group, were only identified recently, in 2013. These viruses are huge, and have enormous genomes. They're so big that the first scientists who observed them in amoebas thought that they were parasitic bacteria. You can see them with a regular light microscope; that's how big they are."

Dr. Kaz nods. "They're shockingly large compared to most other viruses."

"PVG has over two million base pairs in its genome, and its genes don't resemble any known cell lineages. We don't know what most of them actually do," says Black Tee. "It's got double-stranded DNA and a viral envelope. It *looks* like a bacterial cell. The only thing stopping it from being one is that it doesn't have any ribosomes to make its own proteins, so it doesn't have any enzymes to make its own

energy, and it can't divide to replicate itself. So it has to hijack another cell to do all that. A lot of people consider pandoraviruses to be a 'missing link' between viruses and bacteria."

"This is really interesting stuff, but how does it connect to the false negative tests?"

Black Tee nods and holds up her hands in a *be patient* gesture. "So, another interesting thing about pandoraviruses in general and PVG in particular? They can shuffle around their surface antigens to reduce or even eliminate host immune reactions. They do this before they invade a cell, but they can also do it once they're inside. And in an increasing number of people, PVG is taking up residence in infected people's cells and pretending to be an organelle like a mitochondrion. And once they've turned themselves into pseudo-organelles, there aren't any viral antigens floating around in their body fluids, so even the PCR tests come back negative."

"Ohhh, that's tricky!"

Black Tee nods vigorously. "We think the CDC probably figured this out a while ago, but they've been sitting on the information."

Dr. Kaz looks profoundly taken aback. "That would be completely unethical. Why would they do that?"

"Because if the virus isn't showing up in blood, saliva, urine, et cetera … the only way to know if a person has PVG or not is to do a biopsy of the specific infected tissue. And for a lot of people, that would mean needing to get a spinal tap. Which is painful, and dangerous, and expensive, and … can you imagine how much the public would freak out over that? People threw massive tantrums over getting vaccinated, and that's *easy*."

"Damn." Dr. Kaz sighs. "Yeah, that's a political hot potato, for sure."

I turn off the TV. Black Tee's discovery certainly explains a few things about my own situation. But not everything.

The mysteries that confound scientists compel me, too. I only know what I've witnessed and what the gods have shown me. I don't know their grand plan. The misery and chaos are a means to an end,

and the question of what that end will be burns hot in my mind. Curiosity itches in me like a yeast infection.

I stand, drain the mug, and set it down on the coffee table. A reckless disregard for leaving DNA evidence behind. But I'm doing it.

I fucked a few dozen law enforcement officers my first few months at the brothel. Mostly city police, a few county deputies. A sheriff. They just aren't complicated men. Not deep thinkers, as a group. A bit smarter than the gangsters who sometimes come in from up north, but often cut from the same coarse cloth. Of course, I also know I've experienced a selection bias: those who go into the profession because they actually do want to protect and serve probably see visiting a brothel as unseemly or distasteful.

Part of me is hoping a cop comes knocking on my door, because it might be fun to see if I can get myself out of that kind of predicament. After all, Dahmer did. Straight-up had the cops find his teen victim Konerak Sinthasomphone on a street corner. Naked, bleeding from his ass, and disoriented because Dahmer had drilled a fucking hole in his skull and injected hydrochloric acid, trying to make him into a kind of zombie. But Dahmer played it totally cool, and they handed the kid right back to him. I'm a lot fucking smarter than Dahmer. I'd never flunk out of school.

"I'm not going to stop myself," I tell Nurse Tesfaye's corpse. "I need to find out what happens next. I need that very, very much. I need to be alive when it happens and see it with my own two eyes."

She doesn't answer me, but I didn't expect her to.

CHAPTER 19

Michael comes to me a week later in all his blazing, profane, dong-hanging glory to tell me in ecclesiastic proclamations what a very good bad girl I've been and how pleased the gods are with my progress. And then he gives me a cryptic little homework assignment related to the future-precious She.

So I'm up at the crack of dawn, dressing in a nice soft-butch outfit that isn't *too* sexy—I don't want to attract the wrong kind of attention—and reloading my adventure bag. I hit the nearby Target as soon as it opens, to get an inexpensive but nice-looking gold cross necklace, pull a few hundred dollars out from a nearby ATM. Then I'm on the road heading southwest.

The flyspeck town Michael showed me is forty miles past the state line and twenty miles off the interstate. On one side of the road is a truck stop, a log cabin roadhouse called the Patriot Tavern, and a run-down motel called Sweet Zee's Lodge that looks like it was once a Knights Inn. The tall aluminum pole in front of the tavern is flying an American flag, a "Blue Lives Matter" flag, and a bright yellow Gadsden flag. Across the street is a small cemetery, a dingy white clapboard Baptist church, and an abandoned Dairy Queen with boarded-up windows.

The pothole-pocked parking lot of the motel is practically empty. It strikes me as the kind of place that's happy to take cash instead of a credit card and doesn't scrutinize fake IDs too closely. Its looks are not deceiving. I even get the front desk attendant, Clyde—who's apparently the grandson of Zee herself—to give me a discount on

one of their suites, after I toss my hair a little and offer to keep him company after his shift is over that evening. If he tries to take me up on that, I know I'll be getting all my money back.

★ ★ ★

It's just before 2 p.m. when I put on my shiny new cross, stroll out into the chilly October air, and head across the cracked parking lot to the tavern. There's a laminated sign posted on the front door that reads "MASKS FORBIDDEN! No unconstitutional face-diapers allowed in here! Stop buying the government's bullshit and breathe free like God intended!"

Well, when in Rome, right? I pull my mask off, tuck it in my pocket, and push inside. The air smells like spilled beer, old peanuts, and stale cigarettes. It's so odd being in a place where smoking is allowed that I feel like I've gone back in time. Despite the overcast of the day, it takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness inside. The tavern's decor is a mix of neon beer signs, Second Amendment fan art, and Cracker Barrel wall kitsch.

A couple of old white men wearing ill-fitting black leather biker vests over grubby tees and saggy jeans are sitting at the bar laughing at something with the bartender, a skinny young guy in a black tank top who's missing the ring and pinky fingers of his burn-scarred right hand. More white scars splash up his arm and onto his face. Nurse Tesfaye's expertise tells me that this was more likely an accident making homemade napalm than it was a war injury. They're all scrubs, and not who I'm here for.

I scan the rest of the room. In the far corner, by one of the few windows, is a tired-looking, bespectacled woman in her late twenties or early thirties. She's wearing a tan cardigan over a long, demure, blue chambray dress, and her brown hair is up in a bun. Her small-town librarian vibe is reinforced by the Amish romance paperback she's engrossed in. A white ceramic mug and a coffee carafe sit on the right side of the table with creamers lined up like bowling pins. She, too, is a scrub … but I can see the bright-edged aura of the

person she would have become if she'd been planted in a place where she could flower. And that unrealized woman is extraordinary, though I can't see well enough to know why.

There's a ring on her left hand. A classic radiant-cut diamond solitaire. I'm pretty sure the rock is real, and considering how expensive it is compared to the rest of her outfit, I suspect it was bait. I saw a lot of bait at the brothel. Men hiding their abusive, possessive sides would give the girls fancy gifts and expensive jewelry. Probably many of these guys really did see themselves as white knights trying to "rescue" a beautiful fallen woman. They'd promise adoration, financial stability, and marital bliss, but instead they'd serve the girls jealous rages, cold silences, and bruises. The unluckiest ones got a baby in the bargain, too, which meant they had to spend years longer trying to pull free of the domestic tar pit they'd fallen into. Or they'd live with the guilt of abandoning their toddler with a man they knew would destroy the kid in one way or another.

The woman in the corner absolutely stinks of existential tar. I can see the exhaustion and tension in her shoulders and in the premature frown lines between her eyes. She's clearly hiding in here to get what respite she can from whatever's waiting for her back home.

I get the vibe that she in no way believes in white knights—but part of her is hoping for one anyway.

So I cross the room to her and stop a respectful social distance away. "Hi, I'm sorry to bother you, but what do you think of that book you're reading? I keep seeing ads for it online, but I can't tell if it's my thing or not."

"Oh. Hi. Yes, the book is great. I'm enjoying it a lot." The woman blinks at me in confusion, then glances around the tavern as if to check to see if I'm with anyone. "Not to be rude, but did … did you get lost?"

I laugh lightly. "Not exactly. I was supposed to meet with a client down here this afternoon, but she called it off at the last minute. I just couldn't face the drive back—five hours, can you believe?—so I

thought, What the heck, and got a room at the motel next door. Normally I wouldn't be traveling so far out, but my office has lost a lot of people."

"Client?" she asks. "Are you a lawyer?"

"Oh, no. I work for Midwestern Empowerment Advocacy." A real organization that I knew about courtesy of Nurse Tesfaye. Sadly, I never once heard of it working at the brothel. "We help women—sometimes men, too—with families get themselves and their kids out of abusive relationships. Not just violent ones. We help people leave emotionally and psychologically abusive partners, as well as other difficult situations."

I can see a spark of cautious interest building in her eyes.

"What kind of difficult situations?"

"Well, our motto is 'If you don't know how to leave, you need MEA.' Sometimes folks don't realize they're in an abusive relationship, but if their partners have economically entrapped them so that they can't leave? It's abusive."

Her eyes have fallen on my cross. Or my cleavage. Or maybe both. "That's … very interesting."

"Hey, do you mind if I sit down?" I rest my hand on the chair opposite hers. "I made a bad decision putting on these shoes this morning."

She pauses, looking conflicted. "I hate to ask this, but have you gotten your vax?"

"Oh, absolutely." Keeping my thumb over my name, I pull my card out of the flap of my purse to show her. "My boss had us get ours right away."

Her shoulders relax a little. "That's good. I've gotten mine, too. Sure, please sit down."

"Thank you. My name is Vanna, by the way." I pull the chair out and settle into it.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Lee."

I put my vax card away. "I'm a little surprised you've picked a spot that's so antimask."

Lee shrugs. “That part isn’t great, but nobody who knows me would ever come to this kind of place. It’s quiet, and the coffee is really good.” She nods toward the skinny, scarred bartender. “There aren’t that many other places still open around here, anyway. I used to sit and read at the Starbucks in Cloverton. Billy was a barista there. But he got laid off after his accident, and then they shut the store down when the pandemic started.”

“That makes sense,” I say.

She takes a sip from her mug. “My husband doesn’t approve of drinking caffeine or reading fiction, so I tell him I am going to a friend’s church to play bingo. She covers for me. I know it’s not right to lie to him … but I really do need this time to myself.”

“You have kids?”

Lee nods wearily.

“Well, that definitely calls for coffee.” I pause and bite my lower lip as though I’m thinking something over. “Hey, I bet Billy would let you take your carafe with you if you asked.”

I reach across the table to put my hand over hers. She inhales sharply when I touch her. Her pupils dilate, and a faint flush rises in her cheeks.

Gotcha, babe.

“You seem like you could use a friend,” I say. “I’m a really good listener. Why don’t you come over to my room and we can chat on the sofa, where it’s more comfortable?”

“I … I shouldn’t.” Her flush deepens under my gaze. Through my fingers, I can feel her desire building. “I only have the babysitter until my husband gets home at six…”

“That’s hours from now. He’ll never know. I promise.”

★ ★ ★

In my motel room, Lee and I share her coffee and chat about books, and then we split the bottle of nice chardonnay that I left chilling in the mini fridge. She’s an absolute lightweight and starts getting tipsy

after half a glass. And anxious; she's terrified of going home drunk. I allay her worries by telling her that she'll be fine in an hour or two.

When she's two glasses in, I rest my hand on her thigh. And I'm ridiculously pleased with myself when she leans over and starts kissing me. Her mouth is hungry, her breath sweet with wine and musky with pheromones. She's been starving for this for a long time. Maybe her whole life.

We make out for a while on the couch, and I tease that hunger into a moaning ravening of raw need. When she's had about all I think she can take, I stand her up and lead her toward the king-size bed.

She resists me, just a little.

I stop, my hand still on her wrist. "What's the matter?"

She looks scared. Embarrassed, more likely. "I'm not as pretty as you. I have scars."

I smile reassuringly. "Real people have scars. You're beautiful to me. You're a goddess, and I want to worship at your altar."

From the look on her face, I've just spoken heresy. But she's absolutely into it just the same.

I slowly strip us both down and kiss her head to toe. I whisper sweet nothings into all those parts of herself that she probably hates seeing in the mirror. And then, when I know that her pussy has opened like a flower and is spilling nectar down her thighs, I take her to bed.

The moment my lips touch her slick labia, she arches her back and cries out. Twists the sheets in her shuddering fists. Her sudden orgasm makes me pretty sure that no one has gone down on her before. Possibly nobody has ever gotten her off properly, ever. She might have six kids, but in some ways she's still practically a virgin. So I give her flesh a moment to recover, then start again, taking my time.

I want to make sure that this is the best afternoon she's ever had in her life.

★ ★ ★

I make her come and come again until she's a sweaty rag doll, her nerves ringing with exhaustion, her eyes unfocused and barely able to stay open.

"Shh, it's okay to go to sleep." I kiss her neck and pull the cool white sheet up to her shoulders. "I'll make sure you get home in time."

"I think I'm in love with you," Lee murmurs as she drifts away.

I've had a few clients declare their love to me in the past, but this time it sends a Cupid's arrow pang through my heart. Poor woman. She really does deserve better than she's gotten.

Ah, well. There's no helping it. Michael's instructions were clear.

I wait until I'm sure she's deeply asleep, then I slide off the bed and quietly unzip my adventure bag. I pull out the heavy two-foot machete I recently found online—it's basically a meat cleaver with roid rage.

I step to the edge of the bed and grip the weapon. Focus on steadying my hands. *Don't fuck this up, bitch.* The last thing I want to do is whiff my swing and have her wake up in screaming torment.

It's time. I take a deep breath, raise the three-pound length of razor-sharp steel, and bring it down on her neck as hard as I can. Hot blood jets across my face, the wall, and the ceiling. I come so hard I nearly pass out. Her body jerks … and I'm relieved to see that it's just a reflex. She's gone. I severed her artery and her spine. Her head's only barely attached to her body by a strip of meat and skin now. I don't think she had a chance to wake. Thank the gods.

I pull the tip of the machete free of the mattress springs, reposition her head, take aim with the spine of the blade, and wreck her teeth so the local coroner won't be able to identify the body as quickly. Her pearly whites make a satisfying crunch as they shatter wetly in her jaw.

A series of short swings is all it takes to hack off the top of her head so I can get to her brains. I've made quite an incredible mess on the bed, but the blade is quieter than a saw. Eating her cerebrum

is a whole lot less fun than eating her pussy was … but it's a whole lot more enlightening.

Because when I'm done, I have Lee's memory of the afternoon. Untainted by her death. Whenever I want, I can see myself desired and adored through this virgin mother's eyes. I can relive what it's like to receive all the very best things that I know how to give. A series of perfect erotic moments I can lose myself in whenever I want. Sweeter than a thousand boxes of chocolate.

But far more important to the gods? I know exactly who the future-precious She is. I have her name, her number, and her address. Once I've done the rest of my homework, I'll know her better than she might know herself.

And I can't wait to get my hands on her.

PART THREE
MATER CALAMITAS

Will matter then be destroyed or not?
The Savior said, All nature, all formations,
all creatures exist in and with one another,
and they will be resolved again
into their own roots. For the nature
of matter is resolved into the roots
of its own nature alone.

—The Gospel of Mary Magdalene

CHAPTER 20

I first met Erin Holdaway a few months before the pandemic. We both had jobs at UCC but weren't coworkers, not at first. It was my second week in the network operations center, and the computer I'd been assigned to kept rebooting at random. Really, really annoying, especially when I was in the middle of administering another machine, so I called the company's tech support line. They sent Erin over to double-check my diagnosis and swap my computer out.

I had to work hard to stifle a gasp when she showed up at my workstation, because she could have been my sister Leila's identical twin. And part of my brain was *certain* she was Leila and was absolutely overwhelmed with joy. But the other part of my brain, the rational part, knew she couldn't possibly be Leila and was desperately trying to keep me from doing something socially unacceptable, like grabbing a complete stranger and hugging her.

Don't be weird, Mar, my rational brain lectured me. *You're always so weird.*

But I guess I must have beamed at her like she was Leila—half the time I have no idea what my face is doing—because she stopped, looked a little surprised in that *Have we met?* kind of way, smiled back at me, and then glanced down at her work tablet.

"Are you … Mareva Buduci?" she asked.

"Yes, that's me!" I tried to shift my expression to the normal kind of smile you'd give a coworker. Warm, but with professional distance. We're all one big happy family here at UCC—but if you lose your job, you're dead to everyone.

“I’m Erin from Desktop Support. So you’re having a problem with your machine?” Her gaze shifted to my computer.

“Yes. I think it’s overheating because of a bad fan.”

“Well, let me check things out…”

I got up from my seat to let her work and tried not to stare at her. If I looked closely, I could see small features that weren’t Leila’s. She was a little paler and had a faint scattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her hair was a lighter shade of brown, her eyebrows rounder. Her lips fuller.

But she had the same gorgeous cornflower blue eyes as my sister. And that, more than anything, made her resemblance astonishing. It made my heart ache around the Leila-shaped chasm inside me.

My rational brain tried to dismiss my feelings. It wasn’t any surprise that I’d run into another woman who looked like Leila, was it? Not after the massive die-off that humanity suffered seventy thousand years ago. Our species had been reduced to just a few thousand individuals, and we hadn’t recovered our diversity. There are only so many faces to go around these days.

★ ★ ★

I was my parents’ surprise baby. They’d had Leila in January, and the doctor told my mother that she couldn’t get pregnant while she was nursing. Well, the doctor was wrong. I was born a month early, in October, less than a year after Leila’s arrival.

After we were both toddlers, a lot of people assumed she and I were fraternal twins. My body had grown quickly despite my prematurity, but my brain lagged hers by about a year. Sometimes more. She was so smart, and taught herself how to read when she was five. I didn’t learn to read until first grade, despite Leila trying to help me, and even then I wasn’t one of the first kids in my class to catch on. That was so frustrating, because I wanted to match Leila in every way I could.

I was Leila's adoring shadow from the time I could crawl, and I was utterly heartbroken when she started kindergarten without me. Apparently I staged a hunger strike, but I don't remember that well. A week into my protest, my parents bargained with the school district to let me in early so my sister and I could be in the same class.

When we were little kids, we were as close as any two people have ever been. Before we learned to speak, we shared our own secret language. We ate together, laughed together, cried together. I think we shared our dreams.

But my fear, my sickness, drove us apart and disrupted that precious bond. I have spent most of my adult life regretting pushing her away.

What happened? I have a rare, previously undocumented genetic illness. I'm prone to growing chronic benign teratomas. "Benign" only in the sense that the cells that compose them aren't identifiably malignant. Not *cancer*. Not likely to kill me *directly*.

My first diagnosis came when I was just two years old. A lump in my upper belly, near my diaphragm, got bigger and bigger, and I started having trouble keeping food down. After the MRI showed a complicated mass, the pediatric surgeon operated on me and pulled out a baseball-size encysted tumor filled with distorted vertebrae, finger bones, teeth, and dark hair. The thing had been pressing on my gastroesophageal junction. He diagnosed me with fetus in fetu: a twin I'd absorbed in the womb had become a growing parasite inside my body.

Leila and I were much too young to understand what was happening, past the idea that I had gotten sick and had to go to the hospital. But our parents assured us that I'd get well again. She gave me her favorite teddy bear to take with me. The surgery was a success, and I healed up fine, and that seemed to be that. My parents were satisfied it was all over, and our family could go back to our normal lives.

But, like any kid, I was curious, and my curiosity about my surgical scars grew as I aged. My parents didn't like talking about it

and answered my questions tersely or not at all. (Mom's typical response was "Oh, honey, don't think about such morbid things!") Finally, when I was eight or nine, my father pointed me to an article in a medical encyclopedia but didn't offer to discuss it with me afterward. Thanks to that text, I understood fetus in fetu just enough to get completely freaked out about what it all meant.

Around that same time, Leila and I were voraciously reading about carnivorous animals. She'd chosen wolves but I'd chosen sharks. And I'd learned about female sand tiger sharks, whose wombs routinely turned into Darwinian battles royale in which one unborn pup would mercilessly devour its fetal siblings.

Had I done that to my twin? Is that how I'd come to absorb it? Had I, as a fetus, been hatefully jealous of my mother's attention and just wanted there to be one of us? I pictured myself unhinging my jaw like a deep-sea creature and swallowing my twin whole as we floated in our amniotic sacs.

But I didn't remember hating my twin. Why would I hate it? After all, I loved Leila with all my heart. Didn't I?

I started to have nightmares about the vengeful ghost of the twin coming out of me at night and hurting Leila. Sometimes the ghost would smother her with a pillow, or push her down the narrow, dark basement stairs. Sometimes it would cut her up with knives from the kitchen.

My rational brain tried to push the dreams away, but it wasn't very strong back then. Science didn't have the same tight grip on my imagination that superstition did. I started to wonder: Would the act of loving Leila as much as I did make the ghost angry and envious? Was my adoration inadvertently endangering her?

So I decided to try to put some distance between us, for Leila's own good. Try to love her less. Try to do more things on my own. I could see the hurt and confusion in her eyes when I turned her down when she wanted to build Legos together or walk to the playground. She asked me why, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth.

What if voicing my fears made them become real, like saying “Bloody Mary” in front of a mirror?

She *knew* I was lying to her. And that made her pain so much more intense. I felt awful, but I figured if I had a choice between hurting her feelings or letting the ghost murder her, well. Eventually she’d get over feeling shunned.

Shortly thereafter, I got my second diagnosis: a tumor in the back of my upper left arm. I still remember seeing it on the MRI, curled up like a strange embryo. Crushing my radial nerve, so it had to come out.

The night before I went in for my surgery, I couldn’t sleep and slipped downstairs to go sit on the porch. As I was sneaking through the living room, I overheard my parents talking in my father’s study, and I stopped in the shadow of the entertainment center to eavesdrop.

“It’s my fault,” she said. “If I’d just double-checked the doctor’s advice, we could have used protection. We could have had another baby after Leila was in preschool, like we planned.”

“Honey, it’s not your fault. I could have checked his advice, too. He should have checked himself!”

“Just a few months later, my body would’ve healed. It would’ve had the strength to make a normal baby.”

My face burned with embarrassed horror when she said that. She sounded so bitter, so disappointed. Was I a burden? Did I not really deserve to be alive?

“It’s not your fault,” he repeated. “These things happen. Besides, she’s not *that* bad off. She’s a smart girl. Pretty, like you. As long as she doesn’t get a tumor in her face, she’ll be fine.”

I wanted to throw up. I hurried back upstairs to hide under my sheets and quietly cry, my face to the wall.

Soon I heard the creak of Leila’s mattress and the rustle of her slipping out from beneath her My Little Pony bedspread.

“What’s wrong, Mar?” She put her hand on my shoulder.

How could I tell her the truth? I was too embarrassed.

“I’m scared about the surgery,” I sobbed. It wasn’t *exactly* a lie. I *was* afraid.

Leila climbed into bed behind me, the big spoon. She started to stroke my hair, like our mom did when we were sick, and quietly sang “You Are My Sunshine” to me.

And that made me cry even harder.

★ ★ ★

The surgery was a success. In eight weeks, the scar on my arm was nothing more than a thin pink line. I tried my best to forget what I’d overheard, as my body healed. But my parents’ words stuck in my memory like a knife.

★ ★ ★

Years later, I’d want to punch my first pediatric oncologist for misdiagnosing my teratoma as fetus in fetu. I’d also want to kick my parents for never questioning what he told them. Never getting a second opinion even after I grew new tumors.

Because I never had a twin.

I hadn’t absorbed anyone else.

I hadn’t created a vengeful ghost anywhere except my imagination. All along, it was just my cells malfunctioning. I never needed to push my sister away. It wasn’t for anyone’s good, and it wounded us both. Forever. For *nothing*.

The damage was done. Leila withdrew from me in our teen years just the same as I had withdrawn from her. I knew she was lonely, because I could see that angry pain in her eyes. It mirrored what I felt in my own heart. But I was so embarrassed about my wild, childish ideas about a murder ghost, I didn’t know how to explain it all to her. I didn’t know how to fix things between us.

The worst part? Lonely seventeen-year-old girls are the perfect chum for a certain type of shark. One she had the misfortune to meet at my parents’ church.

David was nearly a decade older than her. A young MD doing his orthopedic surgery residency at a local hospital. She went absolutely crazy over him. He took her to nice places, brought her flowers, and made her feel like a princess.

Their age difference made me uneasy. What kind of fully grown, pushing-thirty man is interested in a teenager? *Love bombing* and *grooming* weren't terms I'd learn until I was in college, but I could see David use them on Leila. And I instinctively knew the situation wouldn't end well for her.

I tried to tell her that he was dangerous. But she got angry at me and accused me of being jealous. It drove us further apart.

My parents were in a much better position to get her away from David, but he was polite, intelligent, ambitious, and stood to make a very good salary later on. His father was the head of a local law firm. Aside from the sheer inappropriate creepiness of what he was doing, how could they object to her dating a doctor from a well-to-do family? That made him perfect husband material, right? He was camouflaging a huge red flag behind a bunch of fluttering gold-star pennants.

What none of us knew yet was that he absolutely believed that couples should only trust in God for their family planning. They eloped when Leila was eighteen, and she got pregnant on her wedding night. They didn't get much of a honeymoon because David couldn't take time away from his residency. She had her first baby at his hospital just a month shy of her nineteenth birthday.

Three months later, she was pregnant with twins. Just like our mother had gotten pregnant with me right after Leila. Jesus.

The twins ended up being a C-section, so all her kids after that were C-sections, too. David had an obstetrician friend of his handle all the deliveries. When she gave birth to her sixth child on her twenty-fourth birthday, that baby turned out to be her last, simply because David's buddy couldn't properly staple her uterus back together.

I almost never got to see my sister after she left with David. He always had a plausible-sounding excuse to avoid our family gatherings. But during our rare, brief visits, I could see how perpetually exhausted Leila was. How motherhood was consuming her. I was profoundly angry with him for turning her into his personal incubator. Even if she claimed that her children were the shining lights of her life, she never got to go to college like she'd wanted to. She never got to become a veterinarian or a zookeeper, which she'd talked about so much when we were kids. Her life was cooking, cleaning, dirty diapers, and homeschooling. Because of *course* David felt that not even the private Christian academies in the city were good enough. Of *course*. Why would he pay his hard-earned money to put his children through school when he'd found a servant to handle all that?

What had happened to her seemed like a living nightmare from my perspective. Just absolutely one of the worst fates to befall a young woman with dreams and ambitions. And I felt so, so guilty. Mostly because I feared that by pushing her away, even though I'd done it with good intentions, I'd left her vulnerable to David.

But I also felt guilty because I was relieved that it hadn't happened to me. Even then, I knew I'd have fallen just as quickly if anyone had aimed a love bombing run at me when I was a teenager. It was pretty much dumb luck that no older man at church saw me as a target.

★ ★ ★

"Yep, you were right!" Erin announced.

"What?" I'd been lost in my grim memories.

"Your fan's dead," she said. "Gimme fifteen minutes and I'll be back here with a new machine for you."

She stood up and cheerfully hurried out, a woman on a mission.

Gosh, she even walks like Leila, I thought.

My superstitious mind chimed in: *This is a sign! You should follow her. Make friends! Maybe you can get back the kind of connection*

you had with your sister?

But my rational brain was quick with a rebuttal: *Work friends almost never become real friends. You can't trust these relationships. Don't make things weird.*

Are you sure? I asked my rat brain.

If it's meant to happen, it will happen, replied my superstitious mind.

Yes. Let things evolve naturally, replied rat brain. *Don't be the office stalker, for Pete's sake.*

"Okay," I told myself. I sat down and waited for Erin's return.

CHAPTER 21

Erin had to run to another call right after she set up my new computer. She and I didn't encounter each other again until the company's holiday party in December, just two months before the PVG pandemic started in the US. The event was at an enclosed pavilion at the zoo, which was all done up in poinsettias and strings of pretty lights for Christmas. I was in line for dessert when I overheard her talking.

"So did you hear about the megacephalopod they found in the North Pacific? The dodecapod?" she asked.

"No, uh-uh," the man she was talking to replied. Based on his designer shoes and clothes, I suspected he was an executive, but I didn't really know any of their faces. Judging by his puzzled expression, he had no idea what a cephalopod even was.

This was relevant to *my* interests, though. I veered out of line and stepped toward them. "Oh, yes, it's so amazing! I saw photos of it two days ago!"

"Isn't it?" she gushed at me. "Twelve arms! Four eyes! Bright red! Nine hundred pounds!"

Her C-suite acquaintance took my engagement as an opportunity to quietly step back and slip away.

"Just goes to show they have no idea what's down in those ocean trenches," I said.

"A shame it's so red, and so close to Christmas." She sipped her mulled cider. "I'm already seeing Photoshopped 'Santapod' memes online."

“Oh, yes. That ‘You Better Watch Out’ one? So funny!”

“It’s funny, yeah, but … I dunno.” Erin looked pensive. “I think a critter like that deserves some respect. It’s majestic, and weird, and it kept itself hidden from us for so long … and now people are making fun of it.”

“People often make fun of something they’re trying to convince themselves they’re not scared of. Humor’s a coping mechanism.”

“That tracks.” She shrugged, then smiled at me. “Hey, have we met? You seem really familiar, but I don’t think I know your name.”

“Yes. You came by to get me a new computer about six months ago. My name’s Mareva.”

“Oh, right. Yours had a dead fan.” She leaned in a little, looked around, and dropped her voice to a conspiratorial stage whisper. “I can’t help but notice that not many people here are as enthusiastic about cephalopods as we are. So, do you have a background in science?”

“I do.” I made myself smile. I hated telling this story, because it still felt like failure. “I moved to the city two years ago to start my Ph.D. in evolution, ecology, and organismal biology—”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh, wow, that’s so cool!”

“But I got diagnosed with a tumor half a month after I got here, and I had to have surgery, *again,* and my recovery took longer than I expected. I just … couldn’t catch up that term.”

I sighed and rolled my neck, deciding I might as well give her the short version of the whole story, because why not?

“They told me that I could come back when I was ready,” I said, “but I looked at my bank account and it told me I needed to get a jobby job right away. So I started hunting. I’d done mainframe work as part of my computational biology minor, so I got hired here at UCC. And so now I work with people who are mostly all well over fifty and who learned mainframes in the army. They never went to college at all and don’t see much point to it unless it’s business school. After all, *they* got jobs right out of high school, so why can’t everybody else? As if, you know, shining yourself up to be the best

possible cog in a corporation is the only reason to go to college. They're all about talking about their grandkids and football. And I just don't have a lot to contribute to those conversations."

Erin winced. "Yeah, that's the problem here. Way fewer geeks and nerds than you would expect at a computer company."

"I'm making two or three times what I'd be making as an adjunct or postdoc," I said. "It's hard to walk away from the paycheck and health insurance to go back to my Ph.D. Even if that's where my people are."

"I hear you." Erin nodded pensively. "I got my BS in environmental science at Northwestern. My mom died my junior year, and I got pretty depressed. Stopped showing up to class for a bit. Barely passed the term."

She shrugged sheepishly.

"I'm really sorry to hear about your mom," I said. "That's awful."

"Thank you." She gave me a quick, sad smile. "Upshot was, my grades weren't good enough for grad school funding. And I just couldn't find anything in my field. I'd hoped to work for a national park, or an environmental nonprofit, but no luck. I mean, there were a ton of unpaid internships out there that I could have landed in a heartbeat, but I needed money. So I looked at tech jobs, and landed here. I like the city and all … but it's not what I planned on."

"The city *is* nice," I said. "People on the coasts act like it's just cows and cornfields out this way, so I wasn't expecting much more than a big version of the town I grew up in. It's been a pleasant surprise."

"Hey." Erin bit her lip, looking as if she wasn't sure she should continue. "You said 'again' earlier, about the tumor. It wasn't your first one?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm prone to tumors. They're complicated, but they're not cancerous. I … had to have a hysterectomy because of one."

When I was twenty-one, my endometrium decided to go full teratoma and filled my entire uterus with hollow, bleeding orbs that

the oncologist thought might be primitive eyeballs. What I thought was some bloating and a heavy period turned into a terrifying night of pain and hemorrhaging in the ER.

Afterward, my mother and father bore a palpable air of disappointment that never quite went away, no matter what else I managed to do with myself. Even though they would never, ever say so to my face, I knew that in failing to become a woman who could bear them grandchildren, I had failed in my most essential duty as a daughter. Especially compared to Leila and her bountiful brood.

Not on *purpose,* of course. I wasn't disobedient, or wicked. I was just *tragic*. Which was so much worse.

"Anyway," I said, "the kids-and-grandkids work conversations make me feel pretty left out."

"Ouch." She looked mortified. "Yeah. That really sucks. I'm so sorry."

I laughed bitterly. "Well, I'm kind of a buzzkill, aren't I?"

"Oh, not at all. I mean, I brought up the dead mom first, right?" She paused to take a sip of her cider. "So, uh, do you have any pets?"

"No. Not yet. My family got a couple of kittens when I was in high school: Droolius Caesar and Empurrer Clawdius—"

She burst out giggling. "Oh, wow, I love those names!"

"My parents still have them. They're the best boys. I miss them terribly. I'd like to get a kitten or two from one of the shelters, but I live by myself and I work a lot of overtime. And for all I know, I could get a new tumor tomorrow, and it could be bad … It doesn't seem fair to get pets when I'm not sure I could care for them properly."

"Yeah. That's how my boyfriend and I feel. I like cats, too, but Gregory's more a dog person. So we talk about getting dogs a lot, but the time hasn't seemed right." Erin paused briefly. Another nervous lip bite. "So, do you have a boyfriend? Girlfriend? Nonbinary extra-friendly friend?"

I shook my head. "I tried dating a little in undergrad, but it just didn't feel right. I'm not really attracted to people like that. I mean, I

like cuddling and going out, but fooling around … it's not really for me."

Her eyebrows rose in apparent curiosity. "Oh, you're an ace?"

I hedged. "Maybe? The hysterectomy definitely affected how I feel down there. Could be my hormones are off. I've been too busy to try to figure it all out. In some ways it seems like a blessing. I had friends in high school and college who got absolutely infatuated with someone who was just awful for them and derailed their whole lives…"

I trailed off, thinking of Leila.

"Yeah, the sexiest people do seem to be the hottest messes, don't they? I feel really lucky that I met Gregory. Things are nice. No drama. It's a good change from the people I dated before."

I smiled at her. "Maybe I'll meet someone like him someday. Who knows?"

"Hey." She glanced at the dessert tables. "Not to change the subject, but I saw you were in line, and it looks like the chocolate mousse is almost gone. It is *amazing,* and I'd hate for you to miss out."

"Okay," I laughed. "I love chocolate, so I definitely want to try it. It's been good talking to you."

"It's been great to get to know you better. Like, *authentically* get to know you." She raised her red plastic Solo cup. "Here's to good desserts, holiday pay, financial stability, and geeky new work friends."

My rat brain and superstitious mind victory danced with each other.

I smiled back at Erin and raised an imaginary glass. "Cheers."

★ ★ ★

I lost three coworkers right away in the pandemic: Sandy, Richard, and Joan. They'd shared the same shift for years and had a Thursday night poker game they all attended. Apparently, one of their friends got infected early and spread it to everyone there.

Sandy and Richard had fatal hemorrhages in the ER, and Joan ended up having a stroke and had to go to a nursing home. It was really awful. PVG isn't kind to anyone, but it's particularly brutal for older folks.

The only upside, for the rest of us, was that they were all off on the days when they were asymptomatic and infectious. And that was absolutely blind luck. UCC hadn't implemented a mask mandate at our facility yet, but they certainly did after everyone learned we'd just lost all our senior mainframe computer operators and narrowly avoided a wipe of the whole shift.

So I was nervous and excited when I found out Erin would be joining us in network ops. Nervous because, obviously, I worried about catching PVG. Still, this was a prime opportunity for a real friendship to continue to evolve naturally, as my rat brain insisted it must.

But the Erin who came to work third shift? She was not the same woman I'd chatted with in December.

Her personality had radically shifted. She was withdrawn, seemed profoundly depressed—I mean, I would have been, too—and spoke so slowly I wondered if she'd had a stroke. But, surprisingly, her work was fine. I guess if you start out with a lot of brains, you can afford to lose a few before you end up unemployed, even at a place like UCC. Most everything we did was just a matter of following written procedures, and those were composed in simple, straightforward language, so that an average high school graduate could easily comprehend them in the middle of an emergency when everyone was yelling. Read the manual all day, every day. We weren't expected to be innovative, agile thinkers except on very rare occasions.

In later months, she got jumpy and seemed increasingly agitated. Paranoid. I sometimes heard her muttering about someone named Betty. I was curious about who that was. A little jealous, even. But at that point I was too afraid to get close enough to her to ask.

Erin’s physical change was enormous, too. She’d lost twenty or thirty pounds—and those were not really pounds she had to lose. And she just kept losing weight. Within a couple of months, she looked like a starved refugee from a concentration camp. I didn’t know if her hair fell out, because she kept her hoodie up all the time to shield her eyes from the overhead lights. Her scleras were mottled black and red from microhemorrhages, and she’d developed an awful gray pallor … She just didn’t even look *alive* anymore, after a certain point.

And toward the end … her back. My goodness. I couldn’t imagine what that growth might be, but it was enormous. It looked painful. She couldn’t really sit in her chair, so I found her a stool from way in the back of the server room. I knew she had to see a doctor regularly, so I assumed that whatever was happening, her physician knew about it and it was under control. But it grew so fast, I knew it couldn’t be good.

And it really, really wasn’t.

CHAPTER 22

I knew Erin was in a bad way the night before the incident. She'd come to work on time but it seemed like she could barely stand up. Barely speak. Quietly agitated—she didn't say anything but her knee was bouncing up and down in what looked like extreme anxiety. Way, way out of it. I wondered if I should message our supervisor and have him send her home. But I didn't, because I didn't want her to get into trouble. I've often wondered what would have happened if I'd followed my first instinct. Maybe nothing would have ultimately changed.

For most of the night, things went relatively well. We didn't have to work any difficult server alerts, didn't have to pull together as a team, so I don't know that anyone else was much aware that Erin was having some kind of crisis.

A little after 8 a.m., an hour before our shift ended, a new tech lead named Devin came in to ask Jorge about something. I didn't catch all of what they were chatting about. But Erin was staring at Devin, her eyes hollow. Her hands had gone slack on her keyboard. Nobody else noticed, I think.

"Sweet, it's a plan," Devin said to Jorge. "Well, I need to head upstairs for the Azure training class. Catch you later!"

And he got up and headed out, whistling a tune from a Pixar movie. Erin got up, grunting in pain, and strode after him. I was surprised she could move that quickly.

Something wasn't right. I *knew* it. I just didn't know what, or what to do about it. So I sat there for maybe a minute, but then I decided I

should really go check on Erin. Maybe she just needed to go pee really badly, and her following Devin out was just a coincidence. But if not …

I didn't have a clear idea of what I planned to do, other than knock on the PVG-only restroom door and ask if she was okay. Which wasn't much. It probably wouldn't be anything helpful. But it felt wrong to just sit there stewing in my worries.

I set myself on Break, grabbed my purse, and went out to what had been the accessible restroom. Knocked. No answer. I tried the handle and opened the door. The green-tiled, claustrophobic little room was empty. The feeling that something was seriously wrong congealed to a hard lump in my chest. So I walked up and down the tall, glass-and-chrome atrium, casually poking my head into conference rooms and cubbies and behind potted sago palms to see if I could find her.

I was about fifteen feet away from the security guard's station with its banks of closed-circuit TV monitors when I heard him moan, "Oh my fucking God. Oh my *fucking God*."

I heard him slap his panic button a moment before the emergency alarms went off.

He stood up, eyes wide, and hollered, "Everyone out to the parking lot! We have a situation! Everybody out, *now*!"

So we all herded out into the parking lot. Most of us didn't have our jackets with us, so we bounced on our toes and rubbed our arms to keep warm in the frosty fall morning air. The dew on the grass was still frozen.

A couple of minutes later, three police SUVs came tearing up and a whole squad of SWAT officers in black tactical armored hazmat gear and helmets with face shields swarmed into the building. Soon after, a red fire department ambulance rolled into the parking lot, lights on but no sirens. A pair of masked paramedics in white hazmat suits hurried into the building, pushing a wheeled stretcher with a gearbox on it.

“What the hell is *that*?” A woman was staring up into the clear blue sky, squinting in apparent disbelief.

I followed her gaze, and I saw something large and dark unsteadily flapping away. My first thought was that maybe it was a golden eagle or a turkey vulture. Those are big birds with six-foot-plus wingspans. Whatever this was, it was at least that big. But this creature, somehow, looked like it had long, thin arms. Birds don’t have arms except in fun memes.

The other thing was that I had a hard time focusing on it. My brain registered it mostly as a dark shape and nothing else. Something about it was triggering a very old fear instinct in me; this creature was an actual monstrosity and did not belong in the world. *Do not look upon it, do not attract its attention by witnessing its existence. Avert your gaze, feeble monkey.*

So I looked at the other UCC workers crowded in the parking lot. Most of them were flinching and/or staring at the ground. It wasn’t just me. That didn’t make me feel a whole lot better, though.

And that’s when the two paramedics, flanked by SWAT officers, wheeled out a corpse zipped up in a black vinyl body bag. Most stared grimly ahead of them, but a couple nervously scanned the now empty sky.

* * *

The police wouldn’t let me or anyone else who’d been working with Erin that morning go home. They moved us into one of the conference rooms, closed the blinds, and told us that a trauma counselor would be on-site to talk to each of us individually. Why *we* needed a trauma counselor, and not the freaked-out security guard (who’d obviously seen something awful that we hadn’t), wasn’t clear. Or maybe he was off in another conference room and had a whole counselor to himself. The police officers didn’t seem much inclined to answer many questions, and they discouraged us talking among ourselves. Not that any of us were in a chatty mood. The two stern

officers watching us especially wouldn't answer any questions about Erin.

It wasn't that the thought of Erin being killed (or perhaps killing someone else) wasn't traumatic. The idea of it made me sad, and angry at the unknown physician who had clearly failed her. But all that didn't seem quite real. Not when I was sitting in that conference room, anyhow. I knew someone was dead, sure. But I didn't know if it was Erin. And if not her, I couldn't be absolutely sure it was Devin, either. For all I actually knew, they'd both run off into the woods and the body was someone else entirely.

And, honestly? I'd been mourning the loss of my could-have-been BFF, bit by bit, for months. It was obvious that she wasn't going to live much longer. I'd let go of the idea of her, or at least I thought I had.

★ ★ ★

About an hour into all that silent, uncomfortable awkwardness, an officer called my name and led me out to a different, much smaller conference room.

A short, redheaded woman sat in a chair at the table facing the door. She was wearing a black polo shirt and a black bulletproof vest with a lot of tactical loops on it that read "Homeland Security" in white block lettering. Her mask matched her polo. She had wide shoulders and looked more physically capable of defending herself than some of the police I'd seen that day. I'd done a semester of judo in undergrad, and she would be deadly in that sport, because her center of gravity was so low.

"You're … you're a trauma counselor?" I asked her as the uniformed officer stepped out and shut the door behind me.

She nodded. "My name is Candy Kleypas, and I'm a licensed professional clinical counselor." Kleypas paused to look down at her tablet. "And you are Mareva Buduci?"

"Yes." I still wasn't wrapping my brain around all this. "You're with Homeland Security?"

“I am. Please, sit down.” She gestured at the Aeron chair across the table from her. “Normally I work with PVG patients who are leaving care facilities,” she said, “but they called me out today because they were shorthanded.”

“What happened to Erin?” I blurted out as I sat.

“Well, that’s why I’m here.” She pushed her tablet to the side and looked at me very directly. “We’re still trying to figure out why the incident today happened, and what we could do to prevent it in the future.”

My pulse rose. “What was the incident?” I paused, thinking back. “Did … did Erin follow Devin into the elevator? Who was in the body bag?”

“Lord have mercy.” She rolled her shoulders. “You seem like a smart gal. So you have to know that I cain’t answer those questions. I ain’t here to answer questions. You are here to answer them for *me*.”

I flinched and nodded.

“So, you been working with Erin Holdaway since she got reassigned, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“She been acting strange lately?”

“Strange compared to what?” I felt frustrated. “She wasn’t the same person after she came back. Everything about her changed. And she just kept looking sicker and sicker, but she kept making it to work, mostly.”

“But had she been worse *lately*?” Kleypas pressed.

“She got a little worse every day. Why aren’t you asking her physician these questions?”

Kleypas closed her eyes, looking tired. “We would *love* to chat with Dr. Shapiro, but we cain’t find her. Looks like she ain’t been doing her job for a couple weeks now, maybe longer. So if you have any information on her whereabouts, that would be very helpful.”

Homeland Security lost track of her *doctor*? And now they were checking with random coworkers to see if they knew anything? Wow.

I was getting the bad feeling that local authorities were completely losing control of the situation and things were about to get hairy.

"I don't," I said. "I didn't even know her name until now."

Kleypas reached into her pocket and pulled out a white business card. Pushed it across the table toward me. "Here's my contact information, just in case."

I reluctantly took the card and stuck it in the front flap of my purse.

She cleared her throat and launched into what sounded like a memorized spiel: "We know that this has been distressing. It's not uncommon to suffer trauma-related stress after an incident like this. You might feel nervous or anxious. Or have trouble sleeping, or have nightmares. Sometimes, people under a lot of stress see and hear strange things."

She paused, staring at me, studying my features. "Did you see anything unusual during or after the incident?"

I was afraid to lie. "I … saw something flying in the sky."

She didn't seem surprised. "What did you think it was?"

"An eagle or a vulture, maybe. But it didn't look right. I don't think it was really a bird."

Kleypas leaned forward, staring at me intensely. "See, this is exactly what I'm talking about. Stress makes your mind play tricks on you. Your brain knew something was wrong, so it was primed to take something just a little unusual and turn it into something unreal. Your mind couldn't figure out what was wrong, so it *made* something wrong. You understand?"

I nodded cautiously.

"And when your mind plays tricks on you like that, I personally think it's better to, you know, just try to set it aside. Tell yourself, 'That was just my imagination,' and move on."

"Okay." She would have had me mostly convinced, except for what she said next.

"Because the tough part happens if we hear that you've been telling people you saw the Mothman or the Jersey Devil or whatever flying in broad daylight. Because then we gotta think, 'Hey, this lady

might have gotten infected with PVG.' And then we have to take you in for a ten-day quarantine and observation, and *that's* no damn fun. And you'd probably get stuck with the bill for your stay. Could be thousands of dollars."

She leaned forward, eyebrows raised, speaking as if she was letting me in on a secret. "And, to be honest? You might not have a job anymore when you got out. I'm guessin' that after today, your employer's gonna be pretty nervous about keeping anyone they even *think* might be infected around. There would just be a whole lot of consequences if you went around tellin' people you saw something strange up there. And nobody wants that. You feel me?"

My stomach churned. I loathed passive-aggressive, *I'm doing this for your own good, see?* kinds of threats, but what could I do? So I simply muttered, "Yes."

She nodded. "I'm glad we understand each other. You can go."

★ ★ ★

Thanks to my many biology classes, I do know what a bird looks like. So after my "trauma counseling" with Kleypas, I was absolutely sure I'd seen something entirely non-avian that morning. Something real and strange and dangerous. Something that Homeland Security didn't want anyone else to know about, since it would probably cause a panic. Because it was something they didn't know how to handle.

But I still had no idea what I'd seen.

CHAPTER 23

I kept my mouth shut about what I'd seen in the sky, and so did everyone else I knew at UCC. We didn't even talk about it late at night in ops, when nobody else was around. Apparently the threat of losing a good job in the middle of a deadly pandemic was more than people could bear this time around.

At first, the PVG pandemic had been like the coronavirus years. Laid-off, healthy employees had plenty of options. But that had changed in the past couple of months. Many corporations had lost CEOs, owners, even entire C-suites, and private equity firms swooped in to loot the weakened businesses, deliberately crashing and burning them. The government saw it happening. But Congress deadlocked over trying to stop it, largely because a clique of senators were shareholders in those predatory firms. They were making too much money to willingly end it. The interconnected webs of ownership meant that big companies often took their smaller, seemingly independent subsidiaries down with them. So the pool of available jobs was shrinking even faster than the pool of uninfected job seekers.

But I was determined to figure out what I'd seen. So I did a ton of internet research at home, subscribed to a bunch of new YouTube channels. I'd been watching *Dr. Kaz Chats* since before the pandemic started. I'd actually met Alexandria Kasabian at a grad students' mixer the biology department hosted during the first week of my abandoned Ph.D. program. She seemed like a really cool lady.

We'd exchanged emails, and although we never really corresponded much, she pinged me when she started her channel.

A week after Erin either died or disappeared, I got an alert that Dr. Kaz was doing a special livestream that evening, so I woke up a little early to watch it as I ate a microwaved box dinner.

"Hi, everyone! Welcome to my first livestream." She waved at the camera. "Today I'm talking with Gabriel Takahiro, a marine molecular geneticist at the University of Sydney who specializes in cephalopod genetics and evolution."

The image switched to a split-screen view of her on the right and a square-jawed Asian man with a mop of brown hair and a sunburned face. He was wearing a sky-blue T-shirt advertising a surfboard company. It was tight across his broad, muscular chest. When he pushed back his bangs, I saw a diving watch on his strong wrist.

I knew, objectively, that Dr. Takahiro was hot. And for the millionth time in my life, it bothered me just a little that I wasn't even slightly attracted to him on a physical level.

The biggest thing I noticed about him? He didn't look happy to be there. Dr. Takahiro had the same expression oncologists have every time they come into the room to tell me I have a new tumor that needs to come out.

"Hullo, everyone!" He had a thick Australian accent.

"So, Dr. Takahiro, you have some new information for us? Information you say is critical?"

"Right. I won't dance around this. I'm strongly advising all your viewers to avoid eating raw octopus. Right now. My lab, working in conjunction with virologists at my uni, has compelling evidence that raw octopus is how the PVG virus first spread to human populations, and it is still an important transmission vector."

I didn't generally eat octopus. Probably, if I'd thought about it more, I'd have decided it was unethical to eat such an intelligent creature. Erin probably never consumed octopus because of that.

But honestly, I hadn't gotten past the part where eating octopus and calamari felt like chewing rubber bands most of the time.

"How do most people encounter raw octopus?" Dr. Kaz asked.

"There's takowasa and odorigui in Japan, sannakji in Korea. Outside those countries? Octopus sashimi, which you'll probably see listed as 'tako' on menus."

I think I tried a single piece of octopus sashimi in undergrad, when I'd gone out with friends to a Japanese restaurant to celebrate someone's birthday. It was just to be able to say I'd done it, and none had passed my lips since.

He continued: "The *one* thing that connected all the cities where the first cases were found—Tokyo, Hong Kong, London, Honolulu, Toronto, Los Angeles, Mexico City, and Seattle—is that they all got shipments of octopus from the same fishing grounds in northern Japanese waters. We've confirmed it. Outside Japan, the octopus went to high-end sushi restaurants that wanted authentic Japanese ingredients, all the way from the rice to the seaweed. My lab and the Branson virology lab are working on a formal joint press release, which we hope to send out tomorrow. But I felt that this information was too important to wait."

"Isn't most octopus exported for sushi frozen before it's served?"

"Right. For those of you in the US, your federal food code requires that seafood intended for raw consumption be frozen at negative twenty degrees Celsius for at least seven days. Or frozen to negative thirty-five degrees for at least fifteen hours. My colleagues in the Branson lab confirmed that those temperatures are *not* enough to destroy PVG viruses. In fact, samples survived immersion in liquid nitrogen."

Dr. Kaz looked concerned. "Cooking destroys it, though, right?"

He nodded. "Yup. A good solid boil at one hundred degrees will do the job. But a light sauté might not be enough if the inside doesn't get up to temperature."

"When did you find out about all this?"

“We’ve strongly suspected for a couple of weeks, but we didn’t want to make an announcement until we were absolutely sure the connection was real. I got confirmation of the supply chain tracking today. The pieces fit. So I got in touch with you and a couple of other influencers right away to start spreading the word.”

“A zoonotic infection spreading from octopuses to human beings … that’s unusual.”

“It’s unprecedented, as far as I know. The closest thing I can think of is transmission of the anisakiasis nematode from squid to people who eat it raw. But that’s a worm rather than a virus, and that disease is only rarely fatal.”

“Aren’t octopuses very different from human beings in terms of their immune systems?”

“Oh, absolutely. They lack the capability to develop acquired immunity, for one thing. So you can’t give an octopus a vaccine—it just wouldn’t do anything. There’s a lot we don’t know about how they protect themselves from diseases. They’re just very, very different from us in every aspect of their biology, so this is a nasty surprise for everyone.”

“You don’t even study diseases, right?”

“Well, I do *now*. But not at all before this year.”

“Then how did you and your lab mates make this discovery?”

“Right.” Dr. Takahiro shifted in his seat. “Everyone buckle up, because this is quite a mad story. So, after the dodecapod was discovered near the Japan trench, I was quite keen to get my hands on a sample for genetic analysis so we could sort out which modern cephalopod species it’s most related to. And from there, we could make some educated guesses about its evolutionary origins. But as you can imagine, the dodeck has been quite a popular beastie, so getting our hands on a sample took quite some time.”

The geneticist swallowed anxiously. “So we sequenced its genetic structure, and it was just very unusual. Some gene sequences were a close match to *Enteroctopus dofleini,* the giant Pacific octopus. But others were sequences that we had *never* seen before, not even in

distantly related mollusks. We just couldn't figure out what we were looking at. We all went out for beers one night and someone suggested cross-referencing the sequences against other genetics databases. It was a wild idea, but at that point, why not? So we ran it against pretty much everything we could get access to … and we got a match. From the fucking PVG virus."

Dr. Kaz blinked at him. "The dodecapod was infected?"

"No, you misunderstand me. The PVG viral genes were *incorporated into its genome*. It had hatched with those genes. Our best guess was that its mother or father—which we have to presume was a perfectly normal giant Pacific octopus—had been infected to such an extent that it spawned a radically altered offspring. A female of that species can lay 120,000 to 400,000 eggs in one go, so it's entirely possible that its brothers or sisters might have had different genetic alterations that were incompatible with life."

"But you couldn't know for sure."

"Right! So I pulled some strings and got myself and a couple of postdocs on board a fishing vessel that trolls the waters near the trench where the dodeck was caught. Hoping we'd find another. We didn't, not in the week we were able to stay at sea. But we caught a couple of common octopuses, members of *Octopus vulgaris*. We also found a longarm octopus, *Octopus minor,* that was a bit north of its expected range. We took the specimens back to our lab. Just to be thorough."

"And what did you find?"

"Ultimately, we found that all of our specimens were absolutely chockablock with PVG. Exactly the same as the first strain that popped up in the sashimi cities. It wasn't affecting them much. Asymptomatic carriers. The virus seemed strangely tuned to be a nonpathogenic rider on two species, but a genome-altering retrovirus in another."

"Do you think that this virus is naturally occurring?"

Dr. Takahiro shook his head. "I do not. I'm not a virologist, but based on what my colleagues in the Branson lab told me, there's a

vanishingly small chance that this is not an engineered virus. And they don't think there's a single lab on earth that's capable of making something this complex and devious. Nobody who knows anything about octopuses would ever suspect that they could be carriers for a virus like this. *Nobody.* This is nothing short of diabolical."

"What are you saying?" Dr. Kaz's expression was a mix of disbelief, dismay, and amusement. "That this virus came from outer space or something?"

"Right. I know this sounds mad. But there's evidence. Giant Pacific octopuses typically live three to five years in the wild. The dodeck is a very big girl, but didn't appear to be elderly, so we'll assume that when she was captured she was plausibly four years old. And about four and a half years before she was caught, fishermen working near the Japan trench saw a meteorite streak through the sky and crash into the sea fifty nautical miles from where she was caught. It's well documented—sailors on four different vessels recorded video of it on their phones. But since the impact was in the open sea, well away from land, none of the news services paid much attention to it."

He paused. "Octopuses are extremely curious creatures. If there was a strange, shiny new rock in their hunting grounds—or possibly some kind of container that deployed after a protective rock exterior broke open on impact—they would defo take a look at it. Touch it. They would very easily be infected by a meteorite carrying a bioweapon."

Dr. Kaz stared speechless for a moment, then shook her head. "People will say that you're either crazy or you're deliberately starting a hoax as a publicity stunt. Or maybe to try to stop seafood companies from overfishing octopus populations? Either way, it'll be the end of your career, my friend."

Dr. Takahiro looked deeply unhappy. "While I would absolutely love to see fewer octopuses killed, I'm frankly a little offended you'd think I might lie about all this. I will email you whatever you want to see. I am *not* afraid of you or anyone else double-checking our work.

Please do! We've meticulously documented every bit of this we can. But I'd actually love to be wrong about this, because the implications here are profoundly concerning on a global level. My continued career as a research scientist is the least of my worries right now."

He paused. "I owe a greater responsibility to let people know what I've discovered, in the hopes that they don't unknowingly endanger themselves. So, probable origins of the virus aside, don't eat raw octopus. It might kill you."

CHAPTER 24

I spent my night at work sneaking peeks at social media and the PVG discussion boards to see what other people were saying. The life sciences community was exploding. A solid chunk of people were calling bullshit on Dr. Takahiro's claims, but he had plenty of supporters who pointed to his reputation and publications history. They said that a researcher of his stature would never knowingly lie about something like this. I still didn't quite know what to believe, but everything the marine geneticist had told Dr. Kaz had the ominous ring of uncomfortable truth to it.

The livestream was so interesting and disturbing that my worries over Erin and the thing in the sky had nearly left my mind by the time my shift was over. I barely noticed that we'd had our first snow of autumn overnight and the parking lot was a slick, gray mess. My thoughts were filled with the dodecapod, and images of strange cephalopod mutations living in the murk of the Japan trench.

So between my distracted imagination and my usual tiredness, I was not all that aware of my surroundings when I stopped at the Kroger near my apartment to pick up some milk, coffee, and baby carrots. I shuffled through the November slush, glad I'd worn relatively waterproof shoes and that my cotton mask was blunting the chill of the cold breeze.

But I woke up in a hurry when I heard several people toward the front of the store scream, followed by the sound of something large smashing through a front window, followed by even more screaming.

Then the crash of shopping carts overturning, endcaps toppling, jars and cans shattering and clattering across the floor.

I was over in the produce section. A young couple close to the front stepped out to rubberneck, but the moment they saw whatever was going on, he swore in Spanish and she gasped, “¡Dios mío!,” and they both came sprinting back down the aisle.

“What’s going on?” I called to the woman as she charged past me.

“¡Sal de aquí! Vamos!” she hollered over her shoulder at me.

I didn’t know much Spanish, but I knew *vamos*. So I dropped my basket and ran. People near the registers were still screaming. I chased after the couple, toward the back of the store, past the dairy fridges, through the swinging steel-clad doors into the fluorescent warehouse area. We dodged past stacked wooden pallets and towers of cardboard boxes and bundles of toilet paper. The air smelled like wet cardboard and old bananas. A bunch of other people had rushed in there, too, and grocery store employees yelled at us, confused and indignant.

We all spilled out onto the back dock and jumped or clambered off the concrete pier down to the pavement.

I took a few steps away from the others and paused, gasping for breath, scanning the strip of woods that ran beside and behind the grocery store parking lot. The not-quite-freezing air made my lungs ache. I knew there was a ravine in the longest section of woods, and my apartment complex was somewhere behind it. But where? What was the quickest way to get there? I knew the route in my car, and although it was certainly shorter on foot, I’d never tried it.

There came the rush of wings, and a nightmare landed right in front of me. Seven feet of dark, gnarled limbs and widespread, naked wings towering above me. The wings were batlike, certainly, but the rest … it wasn’t really like any animal I’d seen. And I had a hard time looking at it. Focusing on it. There was something strange, something jittery and blurry about it that hurt my eyes. It was like trying to look into a strong light. Was it giving off some kind of

invisible radiation? Or was it somehow out of phase with the physical world, and my pain a consequence of trying to force my mind to accept an utter impossibility?

The thing shrieked at me. Slimy, bloody drool sprayed out from its strange, elongated mouth. Off its weird, gnarled, swollen, sucking tongue covered with all those rasping sharky teeth. I froze like a bunny and covered my face with my hands. All I could think was *I'm about to die.*

But the thing didn't attack. It paused as I took shuddering, terrified breaths. It gazed down at me and shrieked again. It almost sounded like it was trying to say a word. *Ma. Re. Ra.*

Was … was it trying to say my name? I looked more closely into its awful face. There was a shadow of something human about its features, features I *did* recognize …

"Erin?" I breathed. "Erin. Is … is that you?"

The thing shrieked and bobbed its head. Barked something at me, a guttural noise.

"Back off, Archivist!" a woman shouted from a few yards away. "She's Chosen! Don't touch her!"

I turned. A tall blonde woman was striding toward us, expression fierce and determined. She wasn't wearing a mask. Her pretty face, designer denim jacket, and black pants were all spattered with gore. At first I thought she might be seriously injured, but then I saw she held a machete in her right hand. The broad blade dripped with blood and was caked with hair and bits of flesh. Somehow, she was even more disturbing than what Erin had become.

Oh Jesus, I thought. *Jesus, Jesus.*

Erin turned toward the woman and roared.

"She's *mine*." The blonde pointed the bloody machete at her like a general with a saber. "I've been preparing for this all week. I don't care if you know her. This is *my* job. Don't push me, bitch."

Erin stepped back and furled her wings behind her, eyeing both of us.

This is insane, I thought. *I'm surrounded by insane people, and I'm insane now, too, and I'm gonna die in a Kroger parking lot.*

"So, hiii, my name's Savannah." The blood-soaked blonde stepped up beside me, smiling like an airline attendant. "I know all of this is probably a *lot,* but I want to assure you that you're perfectly safe with me. Perfectly safe."

She touched her bloody chest with her bloody left hand for emphasis and crossed her heart with her index finger. "I'm supposed to escort you to safety. Although you have been Chosen, some of the Archivists are … well, *overenthusiastic*. We wouldn't want you harvested by accident, would we?"

I could hear the capital *C* in *Chosen* because of her inflection.

"What … what the hell are you talking about?" I stammered. "Chosen *how*? Chosen why? What's happening?"

"Well, it's a little complicated, but the short version is: this is the first active phase of the harvesting and neutralization of the dominant technological species on this planet."

I blinked at her. "W-what?"

"The apocalypse, honey. Doomsday. The end of human civilization." She pointed her machete at people running terrified across the parking lot a few dozen yards away from us. Other creatures like Erin pursued them. "That lady's gonna get harvested soon, so's that guy, and one of us Slayers is just gonna put that sad loser over there out of everyone's misery. *She* gonna die, *he* gonna die, errybody gonna die. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon."

She turned back to me, beaming. "Except you. *You're* not gonna die. The gods have *plans* for you, sugar pie."

God has a plan for us all. My high school pastor's mellow voice echoed inside my head. *We shall all live immortal in His glory.*

Was this some weird, completely bonkers missionary encounter? Was this woman some kind of doomsday cultist? If so, what the hell was Erin in all this? A demon? A twisted angel?

"W-what plans?" I stammered.

“I’m not on a need-to-know on that. Yet. But it appears that you won the cosmic lottery, you lucky little bunny! You are useful to our eldritch lords and masters in mysterious ways that the rest of us are not.”

Eldritch lords? Oh, no no no no … I had to be dreaming. Sick in the hospital with PVG, maybe. Hallucinating. People said they got all kinds of crazy dreams when they got infected.

“Can’t … can’t I just go back to my apartment?”

“Bad idea, I’m afraid,” she singsonged. “It’s Harvest season at all the apartment complexes around here. And it’s only a matter of time before the government decides to send in the troops. Or panics entirely and decides to carpet-bomb cities with heavy Archivist activity. Wouldn’t want you to end up as part of the collateral damage, either! So I really need to get you out of the city—”

Erin screamed something at her.

Savannah gave her an annoyed side glance. “No, I don’t know *where* just yet—”

Erin barked out a torrent of harsh alien sounds that hurt my ears.

Savannah brightened, her eyebrows rising in surprise. “Oh, *really*? You did? Well, that’s just fabulous.”

The blonde turned back to me, grinning broadly. “It turns out, your former coworker here recently harvested the CEO of Mayne Sequence Solar. He has an off-grid mansion out in the hills. Isolated. Self-sustained, with its own power and water supply. It’ll be *perfect*. You’ll *love* it there.”

I was very, very sure that whatever this madwoman had planned, I was *not* going to love it. So I bolted. Ducked past her arm and sprinted as fast as I could for the tree-lined ravine.

I made it about twenty paces before I felt the wind of Erin’s wings. She landed in front of me, blocking any possible exit before she grabbed my flailing hands and held me fast in her gnarled talons.

“Gotta do this the hard way, I see,” Savannah said behind me.

A moment later, she stabbed a hypodermic needle into my neck and I felt the cold burn of knockout chemicals jetting into my flesh.

I fell limp in Erin's grip, my eyelids fluttering, the world spinning.

"You'll learn that everything's going to be so much better if you just do as I say," Savannah told me as my consciousness faded. "You'll learn."

CHAPTER 25

I wake up slowly, groggy, in a dark room. First: I'm aware of the sour-smelling paper mask clinging damply to my face. Second: This bed isn't mine. The sheets feel impossibly smooth and soft, and the mattress is plush, as if this is a high-end hotel room. But this doesn't smell like a hotel. My bladder aches, and that painful imperative forces me to throw off the covers and roll off the bed. My legs won't hold, and I fall to my knees.

"Here, let me help you," says a woman. The voice is familiar, but in my fuzzy-headed state, I can't place it. "I bet you need the toilet. It's this way."

I let the woman help me to my feet, take me by my elbow, and lead me through the maze of the dark room into an adjoining bathroom. The sudden light from the frosted glass windows hurts my eyes. Nothing is in focus. The bathroom seems huge. Beige marble tiles are hard but unexpectedly warm under my bare feet.

"In here." The woman ushers me through another door, into a toilet alcove.

I stagger in, fumble my jeans down, and do my business. Afterward, I just sit there for probably fifteen minutes, trying to clear my head and get my bearings. I gradually remember what happened just before I lost consciousness. All that seems … impossible. Surely it was a dream, a hallucination?

But I'm certain I am awake now. And I'm clearly not in my apartment. So where am I?

I check myself all over. These are my jeans and green knit cardigan set—I remember putting them on when I was getting ready for work. Nothing's askew, nothing makes me think I've been undressed aside from my shoes. No injuries aside from the swollen injection puncture, which aches like a hornet sting. My pounding headache isn't as bad as the pain in my neck. My mouth is sticky and dry, and my right side is sore, either because I've stayed in one position too long or because my liver is unhappy. Both are plausible.

But then something catches on my cuff as I pull my jeans up. A shiny stainless steel shackle is locked onto my left ankle over my sock. *That* definitely wasn't there before. I swing my left leg up onto my knee to take a closer look. The shackle isn't too tight; I can get two fingers under it. But of course there's no way to get it off over my foot. There's a shallow, round, recessed compartment inside the shackle, near the lock. Inside it, I can just barely feel the smooth outline of an Apple AirTag or something similar.

So it's a tracking bracelet. Wonderful. I look around the toilet alcove, trying to figure out what to do. Should I find a weapon? That's what the heroine would do in a thriller. It seems like a sensible step. But I've never had to physically defend myself before, and it doesn't look like there's anything in here that I could use as a knife or club. There isn't even a towel bar. Wait. The ceramic lid on the toilet tank … maybe I can swing it? I played softball when I was a kid. Could I pretend that my abductor's head is just a ball? A sudden grisly mental image of Savannah's smashed nose makes me feel sick to my stomach.

I swallow down my nausea and misgivings and carefully ease the lid off the commode. It's really heavy, but I think I can still swing it. I clutch it to my body with my left hand and slowly open the door with my right.

Savannah sits on the edge of a fancy Jacuzzi tub, sipping from a mug of coffee. She's showered, done her hair, and is wearing a clean blue dress and leather flats. Very professional, like she's just come from a downtown office.

But she's not wearing a mask, and I don't see one near her.

Another steaming mug of coffee sits on the edge of the Jacuzzi, about four feet away from her. A plastic and steel bath seat, the kind you buy for your invalid grandmother, sits near the coffee.

"You really gonna try to brain me with that thing?" She arches a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "You really think you can move faster than I can? In your condition?"

"I … um…" I can't think of what to say.

Savannah sighs and smiles. "Just put that silly thing down. Come over here, sit, and let's have a chat, alright? And have some coffee. It'll help you wake up. I promise it's not drugged or poisoned."

I lean the toilet lid against the doorframe but don't move out of the alcove. "You're not wearing a mask."

She shrugs. "That's true. I've already been infected, and I don't shed virus. So it's not a concern for me now."

"You could get infected again."

"I doubt that very much." She blows on her coffee and takes another sip.

"How do I know you're not shedding virus?"

She laughs and shakes her head. "Somehow I knew you'd ask that. Would a negative on a rapid antigen test be enough proof for you?"

"I suppose…"

I watch as she digs a plastic-wrapped box of rapid tests out of the under-sink cabinet, opens it, twirls the swab in her nose, and inserts it into the vial.

"See?" She shows me the single control bar on the readout. "Negative. So please come over here so we can chat more comfortably."

I shuffle over to the socially distanced bath seat. Pick up the coffee after I sit down. I take an experimental sip. It tastes like two lumps of sugar and a glug of cream. Not bad. No weird bitterness to make me think I'm being drugged again. It seems fine? Almost as important, I don't think I'm going to throw it up.

“So, I realize that yesterday morning was *not* the best way to establish trust and rapport,” Savannah says. “We’re off on the wrong foot. I hope we can fix that.”

“Fix it? You stabbed me in the neck with a syringe.” I glare at her. “Shot me up with God knows what.”

“Because you ran from me! I had to get you out of there. More Archivists were coming.”

“Of course I bolted. You were covered in *blood*. You’d obviously been murdering people. Did you really think I’d just … just say, ‘Oh, okay, this seems fine’ and come with you?”

“Clearly not.” She shrugs and sips her coffee. “My plan A was entirely aspirational. My plan B went better than I expected. This is a *much* nicer safe house than an abandoned roadside motel in the sticks somewhere.”

“I … I don’t get why you’ve kidnapped me. My family doesn’t have any money. *I* don’t have any money.”

“This isn’t a kidnapping.” She pauses, looking thoughtful. “Well, okay, yes, it is, but … I prefer to think of this as a rescue. If I hadn’t intervened, an Archivist could have killed you.”

“Erin wasn’t going to kill me.” I hope not, anyhow.

“No, she wasn’t. Not then. But she’d have been compelled to harvest you, sooner or later, unless I intervened and changed her mission as I did. At best, you’d have made it to your apartment only to be dead by now.”

“Where is she?”

“I sent her and another, named Betty, to go to your apartment and fetch your things. One load is in the living room. I’m afraid they may have ripped some of your clothes. Talons, you know.”

She makes a raking motion in the air with her graceful hand.

“So why did you ‘rescue’ me?” I ask. “Why am I here?”

“I still don’t know!” She shrugs cheerfully. “I just know that I’m supposed to keep you safe and healthy and cared for. I don’t know for how long, but I suspect it might be quite a while. We just have to trust the gods’ process!”

Her talk of the gods makes me nervous, but I don't know what to say about it.

So I point to the shackle on my ankle. "And I'm not allowed to go anywhere? I'm trapped here?"

"Well, trust is a two-way street. I can't do my job if I don't know where you are. If I'm sure, *absolutely* sure, that you'll return safely … then I'll remove the bracelet. But not before. And part of that calculation involves me feeling that the outside world is safe for you to explore."

My memory flashes on the chaos at the grocery store. How many people had been attacked? The seriousness and realness of the situation is sinking in. "My sister, Leila … my folks. I want to talk to them. I need to make sure they're okay."

"Sugar pie … I assure you, they're not okay. If they're okay right now? In a week, two weeks, they'll be gone. The sooner you're able to accept that, the better life will be for both of us."

"But I have to talk to them!" I'm starting to panic. Starting to cry.

"Then call them," she replies calmly. "The power's still on in most of the city, so we'll have cell service for at least another twenty-four hours. Your phone's in your purse, on the living room couch. Out that door, go down the stairs. Be careful you don't fall. Can't miss it."

★ ★ ★

When I get to the living room, I have to stand there staring in awe for a moment. Vaulted, skylit ceilings rise three stories high, hung with four squiggly, colorful Chihuly glass sculptures that probably cost $50,000 apiece. The Mayne family had already decorated for Christmas, and an LED-lit artificial balsam fir rises twenty feet tall in a juncture between the living room and a formal dining room. There's a wide stone fireplace hung with stockings and a huge flat-screen mounted above it. The sofa Savannah mentioned is a huge, blue, full grain leather sectional. Italian? Probably Italian. The whole room cost more than I'd make in a decade at UCC. My rat brain admires everything I see, but my superstitious mind wants to set it on fire.

Meanwhile, some of my personal belongings sit in a sad-looking stack of awkwardly taped boxes that the monsters obviously found behind a grocery store. Stray talon marks gouge the sides. While the teetering cardboard pyramid would have filled my dining nook, it looks small, shabby, and lonely here. Just a plebian pile of Ph.D.-washout debris.

I retrieve my purse from the sectional and take it into the dining room so I can sit at the fancy, glossy, dark wood table that was probably hand-carved in Russia by vegan expatriate Coptic monks or someone. My phone still has a decent charge on it and is getting a reasonably strong signal. It doesn't look like Savannah tampered with my purse or took anything other than my apartment keys and the fob for my Prius.

Surprisingly, Candy Kleypas's card is still in the front pocket. Did Savannah overlook it? Or does she simply think Homeland Security is no threat? Does she believe the gods will protect her from Tasers, batons, or a barrage of federal bullets? That kind of faith worked out so well for people like David Koresh.

I tuck the card back in my purse and dial 911. And get a busy signal. Well, that's extremely not good. I dial and redial a few more times with no luck. A network problem? I hope it's a network problem.

I bring up my parents' number. Eight p.m. is a reasonable time to phone them—they usually don't go to bed before eleven. If this is my last chance to talk to them, I'll never forgive myself if I don't take it.

The call rings four times and goes to their voice mail. I briefly consider telling them that I've been kidnapped. But they're a half-day's drive away … what can they do if nobody can get through to the local police? Why worry them like that?

"Hey, this is Mareva. I'm worried about you two. Looks like it's getting scary out there. I hope you're safe. I'm safe. Please call me if you get the chance to let me know you're okay? I love you both."

I'm supposed to be at work in a couple of hours, and obviously I'm not going to make it. So I call the ops number to let whoever's

staffing the phones know that I won't be coming in and, hey, I've been kidnapped and could they maybe send the police to Mark Mayne's house? That, too, goes to voice mail.

This panics me even more than 911 being busy. The ops number should *never* go unanswered. Not unless there's an all-hands-on-deck emergency. Not unless the whole building's been evacuated.

Nausea's a heavy weight in the pit of my belly. *Please let this all be due to a phone system outage,* I think. I silently pray that my worst fears aren't coming true.

I haven't talked to Leila in an embarrassingly long time. It's just that our lives have become so different, it's hard to make conversation. What should I say to her now? Will it be horribly awkward if she's fine and nothing has happened in her sleepy little town? So it takes me a good minute before I work up the courage to dial her.

Three rings … and it connects. Yes!

But instead of Leila's voice, a young girl answers, quietly and tentatively: "Hello?"

I'm ashamed that I don't recognize the kid's voice, so I'm not sure which of my nieces she is. I know all their names start with *D*. Daniele? Denise? I am the worst aunt ever.

"Hi." I lower my voice to a whisper. "Is your mommy there?"

"She went out last week and didn't come back."

Oh my Lord no. "Is your daddy there?"

"He's in the yard. He won't move. A monster hurt him in his eye and he won't move."

"Is the monster still there?"

"I … I think it went away. But I'm scared."

"I know you are, baby." The awful reality of the situation hits me and I start to cry, even though I want to be a voice of calm for whichever little kid I'm talking to. My tears splash down on the fancy tabletop. "I'm so sorry about your mommy and daddy. I'm so, so sorry."

The child gasps, and my heart jumps.

“I … I think it’s back.” Her voice is tight with fear.

“Go hide! Go hide!” I whisper.

I hear something that might be the rush of wings but which might simply be connection static, or wind in the eaves.

Then the line is dead.

“So, how did your calls go?”

Savannah is standing by the Christmas tree. Arms crossed. Gazing at me dispassionately.

“I hate you,” I sob. “I hope you die in flames.” This is possibly the worst thing I’ve ever said out loud to another human being.

“Right.” She looks down at her hands, inspects her flawless nails. “I’ll just give you some time and space to process all this, then.”

She crosses the room and disappears down the hallway.

I pull Candy Kleypas’s card out of my purse. Open up Maps to figure out where I am, copy the unfamiliar address, and text the Homeland Security agent that I’ve been kidnapped by a woman named Savannah. I give her the address, and just in case she’s too busy to bother with me, I tell her that Savannah has insider information about PVG patients going berserk. Really important information that Kleypas needs to hear.

For good measure, I straight-up lie and tell her that Savannah knows where Dr. Astrid Shapiro is hiding. I feel a little uncomfortable about doing that, but it’s the only ace I have to play. I haven’t forgotten how she tried to gaslight me. Covertly threatened me. Tried to silence me and anyone else who saw Erin in the sky. Kleypas will lie her butt off if those are her orders. So I only have so much good conscience to spend on her.

After I send the text, I try 911, with no better luck than before.

So I go to the couch, turn on the flat-screen above the fireplace, and watch the world thrash and burn on MSNBC and CNN as I weep for Leila, my parents, Erin, my coworkers, and everyone I’ve ever known.

CHAPTER 26

About an hour later, Kleypas texts me back:

CK here. RU at Mayne residence?

Yes, I type.

How do U still have your phone?

S. didn't take it. Seems pretty cocky.

RU in immediate danger?

No, but S. killed people at Kroger with a machete.

Accomplices?

Maybe 2 others? Haven't seen. They might have killed Mark Mayne & his fam. Haven't seen them either

Are they human or flyers?

Well, if she didn't believe the transformations were real before, she certainly knows now.

Flyers, I text.

Other captives?

Haven't seen, I reply.

OK. Stay put. Dont provoke her. Delete these txts. When we get there, come out with yr hands empty and up. Keep em high so you dont get shot.

OK.

I delete the message thread as she asked and continue watching the news on TV. Most networks are playing and replaying dramatic footage of a dozen Archivists descending on people leaving a horror movie premiere in Los Angeles. Most of the carnage is blurred out. Director Eli Korman is gruesomely slaughtered, along with a number of B-list celebrities. Talking heads debate whether the footage is a deep fake or not. Someone on Fox News scoffs that the whole thing is obviously an elaborate publicity stunt. News anchors on other networks look unusually spooked.

My phone pings: I've just gotten an email that Dr. Kaz is about to do a livestream. So I switch to YouTube.

Dr. Kaz appears, her anguished face lit blue by her phone in the darkness. It looks like she might be hiding under a desk or in the back of a closet.

"Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining me." She wipes away tears with the back of her hand. "Welcome to my second livestream. I hope it's not my last but…"

She trails off in nervous, sobbing laughter for a moment, but gathers herself and continues: "So, I don't have a virology topic tonight. My apartment building is under attack, and I can't get through to nine one one, so. I mean. Things don't look so good right now. If you've been watching the news and have been thinking, 'Oh, that stuff that people are saying about flying monsters or vampires or whatever, that's all a crazy hoax' … I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it's real. It's happening. Please, get someplace safe if you haven't already. Do not go walking outside. These things are fast. If you're all 'photos or it didn't happen,' if you stop to take a photo, you're probably going to die. So I have no photos."

Dr. Kaz pauses to wipe her nose on her long-sleeved maroon T-shirt. "I also … just wanted to give a shout-out to Dr. Gabriel Takahiro: I'm sorry I was so skeptical. I owe you an apology, my friend. And I just—"

There's a loud, crunching bang, like a door being knocked off its hinges. She jumps and the phone bobbles in her hands.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Her voice is a tight, terrified hiss.

The image swings wildly for a moment, and then the feed goes dark. The livestream ends.

I just sit there on the couch, staring numbly at my phone. Dr. Kaz isn’t a friend, but I’ve seen her face practically every week, so my superstitious mind is certain that she’s a buddy. And I’ve just come close to watching her get torn apart. She might be dead now. Dead like Leila, Leila’s family, and my parents probably are.

Savannah’s cheerful, casual voice echoes in my memory: *“She gonna die, he gonna die, errybody gonna die.”*

But in this moment, I feel nothing. Inside me is a cold, blank absence. I can’t bear to feel anything. Feeling would absolutely destroy what is left of my soul. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I’m aware that I’ve fully committed to the “denial” phase of grief. So be it.

★ ★ ★

Homeland Security pounds on the front door just after 10 p.m. I jump to my feet, expecting Savannah to come running into the living room, but she isn’t there. I sprint into the foyer and pull the door open.

A cop in black armored hazmat gear kicks it the rest of the way open, painfully banging my hands and knees. He grabs me by the collar of my shirt before I can say anything. Jerks me outside into the glare of police floodlights. Hauls me down the broad stone steps and throws me face-first onto the freezing lawn. My front teeth cut a bloody groove on the inside of my lip. The cop jams his knees agonizingly into the backs of my thighs as he yanks my hands behind my back.

“Identify yourself!” another cop shouts down at me. My masked face is shoved down into the frosty blades of grass and I can’t open my mouth to reply. I’m scared and furious. I’d tried to do what Kleypas told me to. I thought the police were supposed to make people safer, not make the situation ten times worse.

“Identify yourself! *Right now!*” I hear a pistol cocking.

I'm about to die. I'm sure of it. What a way to go.

"Whoa, whoa, Robocop, let her up," I hear Candy Kleypas say. "This is the woman who called me. You okay, Mareva?"

"Yes," I manage.

The two cops haul me to my feet. Blinking in the bright lights, I can barely see three black SUVs parked in the broad circular driveway in front of the mansion. Kleypas is a short, dark silhouette stepping toward me. Unlike the cops, she wears just a paper mask and a bulletproof vest for protection.

"Where's Savannah?" she asks me.

I shake my head. "I don't know. I thought she was in the house. Can you just … just get me out of here?"

"We need to find Savannah to determine what she knows about Dr. Shapiro," Kleypas says. "The doctor is considered a high-value target right now and we—"

The darkness around us comes alive. Monsters descend in a dizzying storm of wind and terrifying shrieks. Huge flapping wings obscure the lights as men and women scream and fire their weapons. The boom of shotguns, the explosive rattle of assault rifles, the firecracker bangs of pistols. My ears ring from the violent cacophony, and I can't think to do anything but drop to my knees and cover my head.

In seconds, the gunfire ends. The floodlights return, and I am bathed in their harsh whiteness again. All I can hear are muffled wails and the crack of bones. Slurping, wet crunching.

"Oh sweet Jesus," Kleypas groans just a few feet away from me.

I look up just in time to see Savannah's machete blade slam down on the crown of Kleypas's head, neatly shearing off the top of her skull.

Savannah, dressed now in a skirt and top made from black plastic trash bags, drops her machete. Moans and falls upon the twitching almost-corpse, shoving both hands into the counselor's open cranium. Digging out handfuls of pink-gray brains that steam in the cold air. Crams them into her mouth, swallowing them down.

Profoundly sickened, I turn away and vomit onto the frozen grass.

One of the Archivists snarls something. I can't see anything.

"You got a scrub?" Savannah replies around a mouthful of flesh. "Hold him. Don't kill him."

She rocks back on her heels and burps, staring down at Kleypas's emptied skull with glassy, excited eyes. Her face and arms are sheened with sweat. "Well, you've been the busiest little bee in the whole federal hive, haven't you?"

Savannah shakes bits of clinging offal from her gory hands. Picks up her machete. Stands and strides over somewhere behind the lights.

"No, no, don't," a man pleads.

Then the meaty *thunk* of a blade sinking into a body.

"Fuck yeah, that's *so* good," Savannah moans.

Oh my lord, she's literally getting off on this. What kind of a creature is she? Every time I'm certain the situation is as nasty as it can be, it manages to get worse.

My captor staggers back toward me, dragging the tip of her machete across the ground. Her face is flushed, her body trembling. Two gnarled, emaciated Archivists flap down to the empty paved driveway in front of the black SUVs and start spreading out a blue plastic sheet.

"Get the bodies and lay them out on the tarp," she calls to some Archivists I can't see. "And someone fetch my knife roll."

"What … what are you going to do?" My voice shakes, only partly from the cold.

"Well, there's a whole lot of nice fresh meat out here." Her tone is casual. "So I'm going to fill up the two empty chest freezers I found in the garage with some choice cuts. No sense letting all this go to waste."

It takes a moment for the full meaning of her words to sink in, because my mind flatly rejects what she tells me, at first.

"I'm not going to eat *people*!" I shriek at her.

“Well, you don’t have to.” She’s the picture of calm. “But we’re likely to be on this hill for quite some time, and we need to be prepared. I don’t know what our hunting situation is going to be like, or if what we find to hunt will be edible. There’s a big garden and greenhouse out back. So you can be a vegan come spring if you like, as long as it doesn’t impact your health.”

I slowly stand up, looking around at all the dead agents scattered across the driveway. I don’t see any dead Archivists. Or even any who seem to be seriously injured. “You … you knew I would call Kleypas. You *planned* for this to happen.”

“Of course I did, sugar pie. You seriously think I’d let you have your phone if I didn’t? I wanted to know what the local authorities are planning. Thanks to sweet little Candy, now I do. I’ll share that intel with the Archivists, and the Harvest will go *so* much more smoothly. There’s a decent number of asymptomatic Type Zeros in local law enforcement, and the gods can turn them all to heroes. Like they did with me.”

She kneels by one of the bodies on the tarp and starts to undress it. “And, as a bonus, it looks like we’ve got a nice little collection of firearms now. A couple of twelve-gauge Remington 870s, some AR-15s, a Heckler & Koch MP5, and of course some .357 SIGs and nine-millimeter Glocks. Early Christmas for us! Well, me, anyhow. It’s going to be a few before I trust you with a gun.”

“You’re a monster,” I say.

“I’m just doing my job. Doing our lords’ work. Halle-fuckin’-lujah.” She takes an olive drab canvas bundle from an Archivist and unrolls it. It’s filled with a collection of hunting and kitchen knives. “While I’m more than happy to share with you what I’ve learned about butchery and meat cutting, I’m guessing you don’t want to see what I’m about to do. So this is where you should go inside and watch some more TV.”

I back toward the door. “I hate you.”

“Oh, you’ll learn to love me.” She winks at me. “Now, don’t go running off while I’m busy with this. It’s cold out and I don’t want you

getting sick. And while you won't be able to see the Archivists in the woods, they'll be able to see and smell you just fine."

Savannah pulls out a knife with a sharp, hooked notch on its spine and starts humming "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town."

I stumble inside, shut the door, and go into the bathroom to lose what's left of my coffee.

CHAPTER 27

The next morning, I hurt all over from being thrown on the ground. By midmorning I start to feel a bit feverish, just a little bit queasy. And that worries me. So I take one of the rapid antigen tests from the pack Savannah has in the bathroom.

It's positive.

I try very, very hard to keep myself together. After all, I don't feel very sick, and everyone says that the symptoms come on blindingly fast, if they come on at all. I don't tell Savannah, and by the time evening rolls around, my temperature is back to normal. I take another test, which returns a negative. So I figure all is well.

But when I take a bath that evening, I find a painful lump in my left breast. After a moment of heart-pounding panic, my rat brain tells me that this is just a bruise. A hematoma, from when the cop roughed me up. That's the simplest and most obvious explanation for it.

But over the next two weeks, the lump grows. Itches. Aches. It doesn't feel quite like the teratomas I've had before. My breast swells. And I am terrified.

My father's sister got inflammatory breast cancer when I was twelve. She and her doctor both thought it was mastitis at first. I remember her telling me that she was going to drink apple cider vinegar to treat it. But the vinegar didn't work, so the doctor prescribed her some antibiotics. And when those didn't work, he sent her for a mammogram and biopsy.

My aunt was dead within the year. It was not a good death. There aren't a whole lot of genuinely nice ways to die in this world, but if I

had to choose between going out the way she did and being torn apart by Archivists? Archivists, definitely.

I don't want to tell Savannah about the lump. Because then she'll want to examine me. I don't want her touching me. Not anywhere, and especially not there.

Living with her is breathtakingly terrifying. She seems aware, occasionally, that she's become a complete maniac. If you crossed a savant with a perfect predator, gave that hybrid a cocaine high, and put it in the body of a model-poised, machete-swinging blonde … you'd have Savannah.

So no, I don't want to give her an excuse to put her hands on me.

Is there a physician left alive nearby, and could I get to him or her?

The tower-top bedroom that Savannah put me in has a set of white, curtained French doors that lead out onto an iron-railed stone balcony. It's empty right now, but it's probably big enough for a café table and a few tall chairs. A nice place for coffee and brunch in the spring. It's high enough to trigger my vertigo when I look over the railing, but tumbling over probably wouldn't kill a person. If you fell—or jumped—you'd hit the slope of the living room's slate roof, slide down, and if you couldn't grab onto the gutters, you'd most likely land in some bushy boxwood shrubs. This time of winter, it might be possible you'd get impaled on a branch, which seems like an unreliable, uncomfortable, slow way to die.

The balcony overlooks the city valley. Every morning I go out there with a pair of binoculars to watch smoke rise in the cold winter sky and listen for distant gunshots. In the first days of my captivity, I heard faint sirens from emergency vehicles; now those seem to be gone. The city looks more and more desolate. The only signs of life are Archivists circling downtown like huge vultures.

I am appalled at the scale of the death and destruction. But only on an intellectual level. It's just too big, too much to internalize emotionally. My mind just doesn't have the wherewithal to fret about more than my ongoing cancer scare. If I were a better, deeper

person, I could probably do a better job at grieving for the world and the people in it. But I'm not that better person. I have to view the murder of the inhabitants of my own city more as a theoretical reality, the same as I'd looked at the famines in Africa or mass killings in South America or Asia that I only heard about on TV or Twitter. What's happened in my own city is huge and terrible and awful but I am apart from it. An observer. Emotionally detached, because my rat brain is sure that taking all this fully to heart will destroy me. My superstitious mind is buried in denial, pretending that my friends and family are still alive someplace, even though my rat brain knows that's unlikely.

Escape—assuming there's any place I could actually escape *to*—seems impossible because there are Archivists lurking nearby all the time. They don't like strong sunlight, but there are thick copses of arborvitae and other trees that give them good cover during the day. A few times I've strayed close to the boundary—a low, primitive wall they built by stacking whatever rocks, cinder blocks, and bricks they could find in a circle roughly half a kilometer from the mansion—and heard the vile coughing noise of one of them clearing its throat. Warning me.

The creatures continue to change. Over the past weeks they've sprouted dark plumage, long flight feathers on their wings, but shorter ones on their bodies, arms, and legs. Their faces mostly remain bare. Erin and a couple of the others still have a recognizable humanness in their faces and bodies, and they're starting to regrow the hair on their heads. Erin's is coming in thick and white. The rest, like Betty, are becoming more like beasts. It's easier and easier to tell them all apart. Betty's head reminds me of a lioness's: her nose is broad and her teeth are sharply feline. But there's an Archivist who looks like a bear to me, another a shark. A spider. A deep-sea angler. A bull. An eagle. A lion. A boar.

I've started to be able to understand what the Archivists say to me. Their language—if it's a language at all—hasn't changed. It's all shrieks and growls and snarls. But I know what they mean when

they utter something. The beastly ones are hardest to understand; I don't get much more nuance than "Halt" or "Turn away" from them. But with Erin, and to a lesser extent the other humanlike Archivists, I understand a whole lot more.

I don't know how or why she and I are on the same wavelength, but obviously something in my brain has changed. So I suspect that my first PVG test wasn't a false positive. It's the most obvious thing. Maybe Erin infected me and those shared viral genes have rewired us both for mutual understanding, or the illusion of it. Or perhaps I was infected, directly or indirectly, by the person who exposed her to the virus.

Erin and Betty are my most frequent guards. They spend a lot of time wrapped around each other in the barn, growling and humming, licking each other's faces. But as distracted as they seem to be, my efforts to sneak past them have always failed.

But today, it's a bright, cold wintry day, and Erin and Betty are in the hayloft. At first they seemed to be canoodling as usual, but things have … escalated. The primal sounds and scattered meanings I overhear make my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

I've got a very warm coat on, and my good boots. I've packed some food, water, and a few other supplies in a sling pack … I don't think I'll get a better chance to escape than this.

So I take off at a sprint down the hillside. Jumping over fallen logs, ducking under branches. The impact of each step makes my breast ache sharply, but I can ignore the pain.

Soon I'm into the meadow, and I chance a glance behind me. Nobody is pursuing me. I can see the road, way down below, twisting like a blue racer snake. I just have to follow the highway east to get back to the city, and—

The sudden rush of wings, and a shadow envelops me.

Erin lifts me off my feet and flies to the shade of a stand of evergreen arborvitae.

"Thou cannot leave," she growls.

I struggle, but I can't break her grip. "Can't you just let me go? Pretend you didn't see me out here?"

She shakes her fearsome head. "I am commanded. Bound."

Up this close to her, I realize that the shorter feathers covering her arms and body aren't really feathers. Some look like thin, flat, distorted fingernails. Some are iridescent fish scales. I see toothy placoid, diamond ganoid, round cycloid, and fanlike ctenoid ones. And there are membranous, veined, vibrating insect wings mixed in, too.

It's amazing and horrifying in equal measure.

"I hate what they've done to you," I say. "I wanted us to be friends. When you came to my desk that first time? I wanted to follow you back to your office. Get to know you. But I was afraid of messing things up at work. So I didn't. But I wonder … if I had, maybe this wouldn't have happened to you?"

"I do not know," she replies. "But if this had not happened, I would be dead. I do not regret this. But … I do regret not knowing thine friendship. Perhaps in another world, another time, we shalt have the chance again."

"Savannah's supposed to protect me … which means that you also have to protect me, right?"

"Yes."

"I … I just want to get to a doctor. A real doctor."

"Art thou ill?"

"I found a lump in my breast. It could be cancer."

"Savannah will help thee."

"But what about Dr. Shapiro? You know her. You could … sniff her out, right? If she's still alive?"

Erin pauses. "I could find her, yes."

Hope soars in me. "You could fly me there. It wouldn't take long, would it?"

"I am bound. I cannot. Go back to the house."

"But—"

"*Go!*"

★ ★ ★

“Erin says you found a lump,” Savannah says at dinner. “When were you going to tell me about it?”

I’m picking at my pulled pork. Savannah *says* it’s pork; I’m hoping it’s not Homeland Security. I’ve already eaten two potatoes and my peas, but I really want to eat the whole pile of meat, too. My hunger has gotten worse and worse ever since I found the lump growing. I don’t know if it’s from the stress of the situation or if it’s a sure sign I have cancer.

Either way, I’ve been eating a lot more than usual, and haven’t gained any weight.

“It’s nothing,” I say.

“Erin doesn’t think it’s nothing. She says your body odor has changed.”

“Yes, well, I switched to a different kind of body wash, so that’s probably—”

“Mareva.” She gives me a hard look. “Please don’t lie to me. I can’t help you if you hide illnesses and injuries from me.”

“The … uh, the lump’s in my breast.” I nervously eat a bite of meat. It certainly tastes like pork, but who can really tell what it is, under the sauce. “What are we going to do if it’s another teratoma? What are we going to do if it’s something worse?”

“I’ll deal with it.”

I set my fork down and stare at her. Does she seriously think I’d let her do surgery on me? Give me chemotherapy? Radiation? *Seriously?*

“How?” I ask. “You’re not a doctor.”

“I’ve eaten the brains of a nurse, a general practitioner, a gynecologist, an oncologist, and an ER trauma specialist.” She counts those murders off like she’s listing computer certifications. “And I’ve got a nice stack of medical texts. I think I can muddle my way through.”

“I’d … be more comfortable with a traditionally trained physician.”

“And I’d be shocked if any have escaped the Harvest. So you have me.” She spears a baked potato from the serving tray and puts it on her plate. “I’ll take a look at you after dinner.”

“What about Dr. Shapiro?”

Savannah gives me a strange look. “I know of her, but haven’t met her. She was instrumental in dozens of Archivists reaching their Becoming, simply because she watched their physical symptoms evolve rather than sending her patients to Greenlawn as she was supposed to. It could be that she was another kind of Type Five, but not a Slayer. Or maybe she was just burned out and morbidly curious. I don’t know.”

She pauses to chew her potato thoughtfully. “I guess it’s possible she’s still alive. Erin hasn’t said.”

“Could we go look for her, though? She’s probably … more experienced?”

Savannah shakes her head. “She’s not part of this. And until the Archivists and other Slayers are done mopping up the stragglers, it’s too dangerous for me to take you anywhere. Most everyone who’s survived until now is a well-armed scrub. It’s, like, all neo-Nazi militias and drug gangs out there right now.”

She makes a face and waves her hand dismissively. “I mean, they’re fun to kill and all, but if you can’t catch them alone, they’re a real pain in the ass.”

“But you could bring her here. How can you be sure she’s … not part of this?”

“Michael would have showed her to me.”

I sit back in the fancy dining room chair. “Michael? Who’s Michael?”

“He’s a monk I killed.” She stares down at her half-eaten potato. “He comes to me in dreams. Shows me things the gods want me to see. I don’t know why they’re using him as their avatar of prophecy. Morgan Freeman would have been cooler. But it is what it is. The dreams are effective. They’re how I knew to find you at the Kroger, for instance.”

“But I—”

“Look, this isn’t up for debate.” She frowns at me. “Taking care of you is *my* job, not Shapiro’s. And I’m going to do it if I have to get Erin and Betty to hold you down.”

★ ★ ★

In the following days, which I mostly spend anxiously pacing the perimeter outside, Savannah turns the first-floor den—which has a wet bar—into something of a clinic. There’s an exam table, surgical light, and an assortment of equipment, most still in boxes. Talon gouges told me Archivists carried everything in.

“Get up on the table, please,” she says. “And take off your blouse.”

I feel myself blush, but I do as she asks. My breast has gotten too painful for a bra.

“Oh, wow, yeah, something’s not right.” Savannah eyes my chest.

She touches my breast, presses her fingers in. A lance of pain shoots through me.

“Ow.”

“Sorry. That’s definitely a lump, for sure. I better do an ultrasound. Let me get the machine set up.”

I sit there and play *Levelhead* on my phone while she pulls the ultrasound monitor out of the pantry and gets all the cords hooked up.

“Alright,” she says. “Lie back and let me get this goop on you. It’s gonna feel weird and cold.”

She gels me up and presses the ultrasound wand into my flesh. It hurts, and I can’t help but suck in my breath.

“This’ll just be a minute.” Savannah peers at the monitor, which I can’t see.

The pressure of the wand hurts enough to make white spots bloom behind my eyelids, but it’s more than just pain. There’s a weird electricity in my flesh that makes me feel increasingly nauseated.

“I … I think I might throw up.”

“Almost there.”

Bile rises fast in my throat. “No, I—”

“Done.” She pulls the wand away.

I take a couple of deep breaths to calm my stomach. “What … what do you think?”

“Not sure.” She briskly wipes the wand off with a paper towel and hands me a damp washcloth.

“That’s it? You’re not sure?”

“I need to do some reading on teratomas. In the meantime, we should let it be and see what happens.”

“Just … just see what happens?” Was she joking?

She gives me a look. “Did you *want* me to do surgery? Cut into your flesh?”

“N-no.”

“I didn’t think so. And right now, the only alternative to that is: we wait and see.”

★ ★ ★

My breast keeps swelling. Hurting. Itching. The itching is the worst, because the moment I put any pressure on the area around the lump, blinding pain shoots through my chest and into my spine. I wake myself up at least three times a night by either touching my breast or accidentally pressing it when I roll onto my side.

And my fingernails are changing. Darkening. Thickening, but strangely. The layer of keratin closest to my nail bed seems extremely tough, but the layers above are brittle, prone to chipping away. The result is that my nails are getting very sharp and increasingly difficult to trim. The layered keratin reminds me of Damascus steel.

Savannah sees all this, and says we need to keep waiting.

★ ★ ★

It's two days before Christmas. Maddening itching wakes me in the darkest hours of the morning. I discover that my breast has swelled up even more, the skin shiny and tight as a balloon. The lump seems to be the size of an orange. Is this an infection? Or is it inflammatory cancer? Oh lord, is this cancer? Am I going to die in agony like my aunt died?

I have to calm down. But the itching is making that really difficult. Warm water often helps, so I decide the best thing would be to take a soak in the big fancy tub in the master bathroom.

I run the water, get undressed, and ease into the bath, up to my chin.

Suddenly there's a sharp cramp in my breast. No, not a cramp—it can't be a cramp. That part of my breast is just fat and glandular tissue. Unless the lump is a muscular teratoma?

Another cramp. A shuddering inside me. Twitching.

The teratoma is moving, shifting. Wriggling.

Something is alive inside my breast, digging deeper into my swollen flesh.

"Savannah!" I scream. "There's something in me! *Savannah!*"

In my terror, I grab my breast to try to stop whatever it is from burrowing into me farther. The agony brings vomit into my throat, but the pain is different now, somehow satisfying, triggering some kind of instinct in me to tear myself open.

Only able to breathe in heaving gasps, I dig my nails into the taut curve below my aureole. My skin ruptures beneath my nails as if I'd dug into a huge infected boil. Blood and yellow fluid cloud the water. My probing fingers encounter something like wriggling worms. I have to get the parasite out of there, so I grit my teeth and pull the hole open wider. The pain is awful, worse than anything I have endured before. Extreme. Transformative. I feel myself floating up, up into the sky, into the blackness of space, where ancient, inhuman gods in the dark spaces behold me … and find me adequate.

The sharp ripping sensation of the parasite squeezing itself free of my breast brings me back to the reality of the bathroom. It jets

away from me in the warm water, a ragged-looking red thing that reminds me of a throbbing, disembodied heart trailing an improbable number of blood vessels behind it.

"*Savannah!*" I shriek, splashing up out of the bloodied water and lurching away from the tub. I stagger to the wall, blood and fluid pouring from my deflated breast, cascading pink and sticky down my body. It smells a little like menstrual blood. My heart strains in my chest and intense dizziness hits my skull like a hammer.

I realize I am losing consciousness, and I manage to grab the edge of the counter and mostly lower myself down to the marble floor before I pass out.

★ ★ ★

I awaken several hours later. I'm in bed under a sheet, still naked except for the bandages strapped tightly across my breast. The pain has subsided to a dull ache. My bedside lamp is dimmed, bathing the room in a gentle yellow glow that still hurts my eyes a bit. I blink against sticky crusts, trying to bring the world back into focus.

"Oh, look, Mommy's awake," Savannah says. "Say hi to Mommy!"

A cold dread washes over me. Grants me a shivering, unsteady wakefulness. I blink again, clearing the last bit of filmy mucus that has smudged my vision.

Savannah is sitting in a folding chair near the bed, smiling and petting something in a fluffy pink bath towel. Something red. Something that looks like a heart trailing blood vessels.

She lifts one of the vessels and waves it at me.

"Hi, Mommy!" she says in a high, Muppety voice.

"What. The…" I breathe.

Savannah gets up and brings the little bundle of squirm closer. What I'd thought was a heart is actually a round head with lidded eyes, and what I thought were vessels are curling cephalopod arms.

"Twelve little tentacles, one little beaky-weaky, a good set of lungs —*not* gills, thank goodness. He's already digging the Similac. I don't think he has your eyes, though."

As if on cue, the little teratomatic cephalopod squintingly peers out at me, and I catch a glimpse of sky-blue irises. My mother's eyes. My sister Leila's eyes.

"Oh my God," I whisper.

Savannah seems cheerfully oblivious to my profound, shuddering horror. "Isn't he *amazing*? I mean, who knows if he's really a he? Could be a she, or a they. Won't know until he learns words! *If* he learns words. I guess we'll find out, won't we? Yes, won't we, ooh!" she coos at it. "I think he looks like a Gregory, don't you?"

I open my mouth to say something, I'm not sure what, but I burst into wailing sobs instead.

"Oopsie, looks like Mommy's got a touch of the baby blues," she coos to the little creature. "But that's okay! We'll just let her get some sleep and you can hang out with Auntie Savannah!"

Savannah dances her charge out of the room, singing, "*Cancer Baby, dah de dah de dah da da da da, de dah, Cancer Baby…"* as she disappears down the stairs.

I roll onto my good side, shivering, and don't go to sleep so much as faint.

★ ★ ★

Itching in my thighs and belly wakes me at some ungodly hour. My scratching fingers find a total of five tiny new lumps in the flesh beneath my irritated skin. Not much bigger than uncooked barley grains, but I can definitely feel them. A pang of anxiety is quickly overwhelmed by muzzy exhaustion. I don't have anything left right now. I just need to sleep.

But I'm just like Mom and Leila, I think, as I drift off.

CHAPTER 28

I dream of my mother. She and I are sitting in her favorite coffee shop, but instead of the usual downtown street view, the window overlooks the playground that Leila and I used to walk to when we were kids. The shop is empty except for us. I can't even see a barista. The playground equipment and the gentle hills of the park beyond are overgrown with vines of strange, beautiful crimson flowers. The blossoms resemble poppies, but I know that they don't belong here on Earth.

My mother sips her green tea latte. "My, what lovely flowers. Don't you think they're pretty, dear?"

"Yes, they're very nice."

I squint. Something's moving in the vines. Creatures. I give a start as I recognize Gregory, my red dodecapod teratoma infant. He's playing catch with a pink, naked spider creature, the pair chittering to each other as they toss a small skull back and forth. There are other weird, twisted hybrids out there, too: genetic remixes of cephalopods, arachnids, and crustaceans with human skin, human eyes, human hair. My skin. My and my sister's eyes. My hair.

The park expands and becomes an endless rolling field of crimson-flowered vines. There are dozens of the hybrids. Hundreds. Maybe thousands.

"I'm so proud of you, honey." Beaming, my mother reaches out and puts her hand over mine.

"Why?" I ask. "What did I do?"

“You’re going to have so many babies. So *many*. You’ll be the mother of multitudes. Your children will be legion. You will be fruitful and multiply and repopulate the world in the gods’ images.”

“What?” I look out at the hybrids playing in the endless field of flowers, and the truth of my role in this newly desolate world settles on me like heavy iron shackles.

“Oh my God. I’m a terraforming engine,” I whisper.

“Well, that’s a rather dry way of looking at things,” my mother says disapprovingly. Her eyes are as black as outer space. “But if that’s your path to understanding, so be it.”

The innumerable hybrids stop playing, turn toward the coffee shop, and start chanting, “Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama…”

★ ★ ★

I wake up screaming. Throw the covers off. Half-run, half-stagger out of my room, down the stairs, and into the kitchen.

I will not be an incubator for anyone, not even the gods. No. Absolutely not. I will *not* end up like Leila. This will stop today.

With shaking hands, I pull a sharp boning knife out of the maple block on the granite kitchen island and find the spot on my neck where my blood pulses. Ram the knife into it, severing my carotid and trachea. Blood pours down my windpipe, into my lungs. More spills down my naked body, staining the white bandages on my breast dark and gory.

I pull the knife free, drop it clattering on the tiles. Take three steps backward before my legs crumple under me and I collapse like a sack of wet sand. Drowning in my own blood. Suffocating.

I think I’ll lose consciousness. Die. At any moment, I expect darkness to envelop my senses. But the relief of death never comes. I hang there in an agonizing liminal state, feeling the desperate pressure of suffocation, unable to move, unable to close my eyes.

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit.”

Savannah has found me. I hear her footsteps pound across the floor. She kneels beside my body and presses her ear to my chest,

listening for a heartbeat. There is none. My heart is trapped between beats, straining in the same uncanny liminality as the rest of my body.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Mareva.” She shakes her head, gets up, and runs off.

An eternity seems to pass. An eternity of suffocating, drowning. Hanging suspended at the edge of death, spinning helpless above the abyss. My eyeballs start to dry out, and it is torture that I cannot blink.

Savannah returns with a surgical kit and a lot of gauze. She puts saline drops in my eyes. I’m grateful for this tiny bit of relief. Then she carefully cleans away the congealing blood with a handheld suction device that I never get a good look at. She opens up my neck with a scalpel so she can find the tissue layers I’ve severed. Sews them up again.

I feel every cut, every stitch. I cannot cry, cannot scream. Can only endure it in silence. Her surgery seems to take hours, and my nerves never grow dull. If birthing the dodecapod had been awful, this entirely eclipses it.

Finally, she finishes suturing me and ties off the thread. She wraps my neck in gauze and tapes it down. Then she opens my mouth and pours the contents of a small bottle inside, right into my clogged throat. It looks like honey but it tastes bitter, foul. The smell of it reminds me of the blood of Archivists.

My heart jerks to life in my chest. I gasp, and immediately begin to choke.

“Cough it up, cough it up.”

Savannah helps me roll over onto my hands and knees, and I hack blood and mucus onto the expensive beige tiles.

“At least you didn’t do this on the carpet,” she says. “Christ, it’s hard to get blood out of.”

“Oh. Oh lord.” I’m finally able to breathe again. My throat feels impossibly raw.

She sits me up.

“Mareva. I realize that all this has been a *lot*. I get that, okay? But you’ve been Chosen. You have a job to do, just like I do. And yours … well, I’m not gonna lie: it straight-up sucks. I’m as pro-choice as they come, but we’re beyond that now. We don’t get to just nope out. We have to do the work we’ve been selected to do.”

“You … you can’t possibly expect me to just breed … breed *monsters*…”

“Hey. Don’t be a bigot. They’re probably all going to be sentient on some level, and they’ll be *yours*.”

I just stare at her, sick and miserable.

“Look, you can’t fight this,” she says. “Did the Virgin Mary get a choice? Did Danaë? Did Leto? If they didn’t, why do you think you get to be special? When the gods choose you, you’re Chosen. *Forever.*”

I start to cry, from pain and frustration both. “I can’t live like this.”

“You can. And you *will,*” says Savannah. “I am here to help you as much as I can, to try to make this as easy for you as I possibly can. But I have to say, this was a setback on the ol’ trust front. I respect that you’re almost certainly dealing with legitimate depression right now, and we can work on that. But if you try to kill yourself again? I will have to take serious measures. Measures you won’t like one teeny-tiny little bit.”

“What measures?” I ask.

“I can chop off your arms.” She taps me on my elbow with her index finger. “I can give you a Dahmer-style lobotomy with acid. Or a more traditional one with an ice pick.” She taps me on my forehead and I flinch. “Mind you, I don’t want to do any of that, because if I disable you, or turn you into a shuffling zombie? Taking care of you becomes a whole lot more work. But you *know* I will. Don’t force my hand, Mareva.”

Don’t force my hand. This was something my father used to say to me and Leila when he was angry with us but still trying to pretend he was being dispassionate and logical in his threats of punishment. Hearing that phrase come out of Savannah’s mouth makes me feel

squirmy and panicky. “Okay,” I say, even though all this is very, very far from okay.

“And if I have to disable you? Your children—your sentient children who will build whatever passes for Earth’s new civilization—will know *me* as their mother. I will teach them what I know about justice. I will teach them what I know about mercy. I will teach them what I know about love.”

“You don’t know anything about love, justice, or mercy,” I reply.

“Exactly. *Exactly.* I *don’t*.” She leans in very close to my face until we are practically eye to eye. “So it would be really great if you could summon up some maternal instinct and actually parent your squiddos, just in case there’s a chance they don’t have to be actual monsters.”

She helps me up the stairs and puts me to bed. I roll onto my side, away from her. The silent treatment might be childish, but it’s all I have the strength for.

“I want us to be friends, Mareva. We’re all each other has now. And we could have a very nice life here together, if you’d just be open to it. Be willing to put the past behind you and embrace what you have now. I know you’ve been lonely, and so have I.”

Savannah slides into the bed behind me and spoons me. I freeze up in her embrace as she starts to stroke my hair the way my mother used to.

“I’ve always wanted a friend like you,” she whispers. “We could be best friends. We could be like sisters. Inseparable. Forever.”

She starts to quietly sing “You Are My Sunshine.”

And I know, deep in the pit of my churning stomach, that she’s the reason Leila disappeared days before the Archivists sent the world to hell. I know in my bones that Savannah murdered my sister and ate her brain.

I don’t know what to do.

CHAPTER 29

Something is wrong with Erin. There's some kind of new growth on her temple. It started a few days ago as a reddish lump that looked like the beginnings of a boil or cystic acne. But now it's a shiny, gray-headed protrusion about the size of a golf ball. A tumor? An infection? I can't really tell.

She pulls her coarse white hair down over it to try to hide it. I don't think Savannah has noticed it, or if she has, she hasn't remarked on it. It's possible that Betty spends too much time with her face buried between Erin's thighs to have noticed, either.

I'm worried about Erin. And I know I shouldn't be. She's a monster now. Obviously. She's one of my captors. But I can still see the old Erin in a look or a gesture sometimes. And that gives me a fragile bit of hope that maybe all is not lost here.

It's just past 10 p.m., and I've gone upstairs to get undressed and put on my pajamas. A rap at the French doors to the balcony startles me, and I hear Erin's low growl.

"I need to speak with thee," she says. "By the toolshed."

Then I hear the whoosh of her wings as she launches off the balcony and flies back down to the ground.

I pause. This seems pretty sketchy. She, like the other Archivists, is forbidden from hurting me, although they're allowed to use pain as a motivator to keep me from escaping.

And after all, would it actually be so bad if she did manage to kill me somehow? As long as it was reasonably quick?

So I put my shirt and shoes back on and creep downstairs. Savannah has fallen asleep on the couch with Gregory loosely wrapped around her neck and shoulders. He seems to be asleep, too. One of his scarlet arms is curled possessively around a plastic baby bottle.

Seeing them sleeping so cozily there makes me feel uneasy and guilty. And maybe a little envious. I haven't been able to pick up Gregory, and the idea of touching him makes me want to vomit. It horrifies me in ways I don't fully understand. Is he a sentient cancer? An alien child? Both? Neither? Was I an unwilling host, or an unwilling mother … and is there any difference between the two?

Nevertheless, he's a small, helpless thing, and I feel badly that he's at Savannah's mercy. But I don't know how to fix that right now. So I quietly get my coat and go outside to see what Erin wants.

She's pacing in a tight circle by the shed, her shaggy black wings dragging icy trails through the snow. Her face is shadowed under the glaring yellow security light. I can smell ichor and raw flesh, and I hear the tiny insect wings in her feathers buzzing like a fever.

"What's going on…" I start, but the words fail in my throat when Erin turns toward me and I can see that she's torn open the growth on her temple. There's nothing left but a ragged, cavernous gash. It's alarmingly deep. Looks like it goes straight into her brain cavity. Ichor and some other fluid, maybe pus, runs down the side of her face.

"I cannot ascend with these memories." She holds her taloned right hand out to me, and I see a jellylike blob of something in her palm. A thin, slimy, twisted gray cord still connects to it. The other end of the cord disappears inside the wound in her head. "Thou must take them. Thou must know me."

I stare at the blob … and my mind reels as it makes sense of what I'm seeing. It's a half-formed almond-size cerebrum floating in a transparent sac of yellowish fluid. The gray cord must connect to her pia mater. It's as if her brain got pregnant and Erin has just carved out the still-viable embryo with her claws.

“Thou must take them!” Erin growls. “I will be purged if these are recorded with my Harvest!”

“Take? How—”

As my lips are forming the *How,* Erin’s left hand shoots forward and she clamps down on the hinge of my jaw with the sides of her thumb and forefinger, forcing my mouth open wider as if she’s pilling a cat. In the next second, she pops the blob into my mouth and closes my jaw over it. My front teeth snap the rubbery cord, and a foul gel squirts up between my gums and lips. It burns just a little.

“Swallow!” she hisses, as I try to break free from her powerful grip. The effort makes the healing sutures in my neck and chest ache, and I’m worried about the stitches ripping.

“I shall not let thou spit them out!” she says. “They will not harm thee!”

The sac ruptures in my mouth, and bitter, sticky saltiness washes over my tongue. I’m desperate to spit everything out, but Erin starts stroking my throat, and the reflexive urge to swallow overcomes my nausea. The clammy cerebryo slides down my throat like a raw oyster. I hate oysters.

“Is it done?” she asks.

I nod as best I can.

“I shall release thee, but thou must not call for Savannah. Thou wilt not enjoy what she shalt do to remove mine memories from thee.”

Two vivid images abruptly flash through my mind. The first is of an antique key down at the bottom of a Folgers can on a shelf in the basement. The second is of a hidden keyhole near a set of dusty shelves. I see myself putting the key in the lock, turning it, and watching the shelves swing out to reveal a secret room.

“What just happened?” I breathe when she lets me go.

“Explore not until the stars are right.” Wincing, she carefully takes hold of the trailing, leaking cord and ties it off close to the wound in her skull. “Keep what thou seest to thyself.”

“What … what have you done to me?”

“I hath given thee the ability to choose thine future.” She severs the cord a few inches below the knot with the razor edge of her index finger talon and eats it, sucking it down like a noodle. “I shalt not pretend that thine choices are benign, but thou hast them now.”

And with that, she turns and flies out into the darkness.

★ ★ ★

The next morning, after a night of fractured sleep and weird dreams, I awaken to the sound of Savannah stomping down the stairs, cursing. “God damn it, Michael! You could have told me about this weeks ago, but *no,* you have to spring this shit on me at the last minute. Not cool, Michael! Not cool!”

What on earth is going on now? I put on my robe and cautiously go downstairs. Savannah is having a full-on manic episode in the kitchen. She’s yanking open silverware drawers and tossing all the sharp knives onto the kitchen island, all the while muttering and cursing to herself.

“Coulda gotten some scalpels,” she fumes. “Coulda gotten sutures. But fine. Whatever! This is all fucking fine!”

She notices me standing there and shakes a knife at me. Her pupils are hugely dilated. I wonder if she’s on drugs. “You know, it’s a real goddamned pain in my ass that I ate those medical professionals, because every last one of them is backseat driving right now. Telling me what a goddamned shit show tonight is gonna be compared to how it should be if I just had time to gather real supplies. A God. Damned. Shit. Show!”

“What … what’s going on?” I venture.

“The Cleaving,” she seethes. “So special. So secret. So I wasn’t on the need-to-know list until the actual day of. It isn’t as if I have to make any preparations or anything! Oh, wait. I totally do! *Fuckers!* Goddamned ass rat fucking *fuckers*!”

Savannah finds a whetstone in the junk drawer and starts aggressively sharpening the first boning knife she lays her hands on. This worries me on a profound level.

“What’s the Cleaving?” I’m cringing before she even opens her mouth to answer.

“Well. The Cleaving is a very special time when…” She pauses, tapping the tip of the knife against the stone. Looking me up and down. Assessing me.

“On second thought,” she says, “if I tell you, it *might* violate the rules about not letting any unnecessary harm come to you. So I think that, psychologically, ignorance is your friend and you should just spend the day chilling in your suite upstairs. Try out some of the spa shit Mrs. Mayne left behind. Catch up on your reading. Whatever. Just stay up there, stay out of my way, and don’t go outside. Especially after sundown.”

★ ★ ★

I know better than to cross Savannah when she’s in this kind of mood. So I sit in the window seat in my room, watching her carry tarps, boxes of knives, and other supplies into the barn. And I fully intend to stay upstairs the rest of the day and into the night.

Except that I’m gradually snared in a partial memory of Erin’s. It’s not attached to any words or specific images. It’s a blend of anticipation, fear, and desire that rises in me when I wonder what the Cleaving means. These emotions grow stronger, feel more and more like my own as the day marches on, and by dusk I’m caught in the grip of an intense urge to visit the barn.

This tension between my rat brain’s insistence that it’s most prudent to stay inside and my superstitious mind’s conviction that this new instinct is absolutely something to obey—my nerves are wrecked. I can’t read, can’t even just sit still and go through mindfulness exercises on my phone.

So I go downstairs, purely intending to microwave some frozen mac and cheese in the hopes that comfort food might help. Savannah’s mania has passed and she’s crashed, asleep on the couch with Gregory after another feeding. Apparently he’s the physical embodiment of two doses of Xanax. Or maybe he’s slowly

draining her life energy. My skin still crawls at the thought of picking him up.

Then, I don't so much hear as *feel* Erin scream in passion and pain. It's like being punched in my spine.

The strange, alarming desire to find her, and Betty, is overwhelming.

So I get into my boots and my coat and go outside. Immediately, I hear more Archivists screaming. Gasping. Panting. Sobbing. Wailing. The cacophony is at once dreadful and thrilling. It sounds like the gods themselves are torturing them all to death. Anticipation and terror build with every step I take across the thawing mud and dead grass toward the huge red barn.

And I am not even remotely prepared for what I find.

The floor of the barn, including the stalls that haven't seen horses for fifty years, is entirely covered in a few inches of straw. Atop them is a patchwork of blue, green, red, and gray canvas and plastic tarpaulins. Archivists writhe upon the tarps in pairs, triads, and quads. The air is moist and rank with the stinks of carrion breath, ichor, sweat, urine, semen, and vaginal fluid.

They're rutting into each other … and slashing themselves open with knives, box cutters, and sometimes their talons. The scene before me is like something Hieronymus Bosch might have painted after he was kidnapped at church, drugged, and taken to an orgy in a slaughterhouse.

"All exist in and with one another!" Erin screams. I can't figure out where she is in this grisly congregation.

"Flesh to flesh, and blood to blood!" reply the others.

"The Mother of All beholds us!" cries Erin. "Let her see us rise from the forms of this world, and from the fetter of oblivion!"

"Flesh to flesh, and blood to blood!"

There. I see her. Erin is grinding against Betty's thigh on a red tarp near the middle of the barn. They've both cut themselves wide open from their clavicles to their pubic bones, their feathers matted with gore. Erin has carved open her left side, and Betty her right. I

can see layers of seeping purple muscle. Shuddering pink viscera bulges through where they cut more deeply. Erin pulls Betty up for a wet, sticky, drooling kiss … and Betty lifts a big orange staple gun and begins to pinch their severed flesh together to join it with gleaming steel.

I look away … but it's happening everywhere. The trio to their left is stitching themselves together with huge leatherworking needles and dental floss. Another group is using awls and brass wire. They've cut the arms and legs off one Archivist to make him fit in their new flesh assembly. His severed limbs lie twitching on the floor, the taloned fingers and toes flexing, seeking purchase.

The Cleaving. I understand what this means now. I wish I didn't.

★ ★ ★

At first, my rat brain is convinced that the Archivists will certainly die after what they've done to themselves. I go out in the morning before Savannah awakens and peek into the barn to see how Erin's doing. Part of me doesn't want to know, but the rest of me is compelled. The stench inside is awful. And I can't see much but shaggy mounds of black feathers. But I can hear dozens of bodies shallowly breathing. They're still alive, or many of them are.

My rat brain tells me that this is an ideal time to run. Escape to the city and see if I can find Dr. Shapiro or Dr. Kaz. Thanks to Erin's memories, I think I might know where Dr. Shapiro is. I have an image of a street, and a doorway. It'll take awhile to find with no internet, but I think I could do it.

But my superstitious mind has latched on to a different set of memories, and it's convinced that I need to stay awhile longer. I need to wait for … what? It's not clear. But the feeling that I shouldn't try to leave right now is very, very strong.

My indecision makes me feel ashamed. Am I giving my superstitious mind more faith than it deserves? Have I decided that staying is best because, deep down, I know that leaving here is a risk … and I'm fundamentally a coward?

The five teratomatic embryos are the size of chickpeas now. Gregory was the size of a big orange when he quickened and ruptured his cyst. For him, that took weeks. Will these grow faster? Slower? If I can actually escape Savannah, but can't find a doctor before I'm overcome … I shudder to think about it.

So I stay where I am and wait to see what happens.

★ ★ ★

On the fifth morning after the Cleaving, I hear a few of the Archivists moving through the straw, groaning. Coughing. But I can't see very much through the gap in the doors, and I can't bring myself to take a closer look.

That afternoon, I watch from the bedroom window seat as Savannah, wearing old, ragged gray sweats, hauls a hose out to the barn and disappears inside. Soon, rust-red water dotted with black feathers floods out under the sliding doors and soaks the dirt. I hear roars and screams, and I wonder if Savannah has done something to get herself attacked. Maybe killed? Can she die? If she's dead, what will the surviving Archivists do?

I watch, and wait. Just as I'm working up the nerve to go down and look in the barn, she emerges unharmed, wringing filthy water out of her sweatshirt.

★ ★ ★

On the sixth morning, just before sunrise, the bed starts to shake. At best half awake, I wonder if there's something strange going on with the HVAC system, or if the mattress has some weird built-in massage feature that somehow got tripped. But the shaking gets stronger and stronger. The headboard rattles against the wall, and one of the Maynes's framed watercolors bangs to the carpet.

A rhythmic low-frequency thrumming increases in volume along with the shaking, a nearly subsonic *voom voom voom* like the heartbeat of some unimaginably large creature. I can feel it in my bones, my skull, in my teeth.

Eerie purple and green lights like the aurora borealis undulate through the curtains over the French doors. We're too far south to see the northern lights like this. What could be happening outside? I get up, put on my robe, and start to open the rattling balcony doors. A blast of cold wind blows them open the moment I release the latch.

There's a gigantic hole in the sky above the city. It must be ten or twenty miles wide. The edges are ringed in dazzling purple and green plasma. Through the hole, I can see an enormous ringed planet silhouetted against a dim violet sun. I'm amazed, and terrified at the technology and power that creating this spectacular portal must have required.

And then I see the massive dark spaceship—or perhaps a space station—emerging through the rift between worlds. It's spherical, shaped like two wagon wheels interlocked with each other at ninety-degree angles. Round spokes from each ring join in a sphere in the middle of the structure. The miles-wide ship rotates like a small moon as it majestically lowers itself to hover high above the city. The outer surfaces of its huge rings are covered in glowing structures that look like amber eyes. They might be part of its propulsion system, or something else entirely.

Erin's scream cuts through the bass rumble: "We are released from this world! It is time to join our masters in the star shadows!"

I can't see the barn from this balcony, and I'm thinking about running downstairs to see what the Archivists are doing, when the four-winged creature that used to be white-haired Erin and lion-faced Betty flaps up from the yard and begins the flight toward the ship. Close behind, other Archivist fusions follow. I see creatures with four, six, and eight wings, and half as many heads. In the distance, I see the tiny dots of other Archivists from the city flying up to the ship.

Have they all truly left? I run downstairs and encounter Savannah in the foyer.

"You saw them ascend?" she asks.

I nod. "Are they all gone?"

“Ours are. It could be there are some leftovers in the city. Ones whose second transformations didn’t take properly. But I don’t know.”

“Did you know this was going to happen?” I ask.

“It was the next obvious step after the Cleaving, but I didn’t think it would happen so soon.” She chews her lip uncertainly. “I thought we’d have their help a bit longer. We’ll miss it. But I guess they’ve earned their trip to space, those lucky bunnies.” Savannah sounds genuinely wistful. “Some day that bell will toll for me, and I’ll get wings, too.”

My stomach drops when I consider what the Ascension might mean with regard to Dr. Kaz and Dr. Shapiro. “Does … does this mean they killed all the survivors?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. There may still be some people out there, but there can’t be very many. Either way, it’s probably just you and me and Gregory now, sugar pie.”

Then she winks. “At least until your next squiddo comes along.”

CHAPTER 30

With the Archivists gone, Erin's memory of the basement blossoms in my mind. I can't stop thinking about the key, and what might lie behind the hidden doorway in the secret room. But I manage to stay calm and keep my curiosity at bay until that night.

After I'm certain that Savannah is asleep, I head down to the basement. This part of the mansion wasn't renovated much at all, and the walls and floor are unpainted mortared limestone stained brown and black by mold and water. A derelict gravity furnace is down here, its metal arms spreading out to the rafters like an octopus. Savannah has been down here frequently and has wiped much of the dust off the old wooden shelves, possibly only incidentally, as she's pulled down boxes and crates to see what's inside.

But I spot the old, rusty red Folgers can down on a lower shelf, right where Erin's memory said it would be. I pick it up and sort through the debris of nuts, bolts, and old pennies until I find the green-patinaed antique brass key. I make my way farther back into the basement, where there are some warped board shelves stacked with obvious junk that Savannah hasn't paid much attention to. Things like old rusted watering cans, a coil of rotted red rubber hose, and parts of an old child's bicycle.

On a short section of wall near the shelves is a very old, extremely corroded push-button switch plate that clearly has been rendered obsolete by the newer overhead light fixture with an attached chain switch. The plate is missing its lower screw. I

carefully pry the switch plate up a little with the key and push it to the left, revealing a keyhole that looks to be in much better condition.

I slot the key into the hole and twist. There's the click and whirr of some kind of mechanism behind the masonry, then a faint *clunk* and the shelves shift ever so slightly. I take hold of the nearest wooden shelf brace and pull, and the whole set of shelves swings wide to reveal a polished dark wood pocket door set into the stones.

As I slide the door open, a warm yellow light comes on in the room beyond. It's a large, wood-paneled study for some wealthy, educated gentleman of yesteryear, and my initial impression is that it's a perfect time capsule of the early 1920s. But as I step inside and start examining the furniture and fixtures, I realize that Mark Mayne definitely found this room and updated it. For one thing, the gilded gas lamps on the walls have been fitted with LEDs that mimic flickering flames. And the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on either side of the mahogany desk have a few modern titles like *High Performance Habits* and *High Growth Handbook,* among leather-bound volumes from the nineteenth century and esoteric clothbound hardcovers from the early twentieth century.

Flanking a dark tufted leather love seat are a pair of Heathkit floor speakers. On top of the leftmost speaker is a Technics record player from the 1970s or 1980s. An album rests atop it. I feel a chill when I see the strange yellow symbol on the cover: Erin has a memory of seeing a sign like this in a courtyard at Greenlawn. I go to the album and inspect the cover more closely.

Into the Hands of the Living God
An Etude in G Minor for Violin
Composed by Dunric Cage-Satin with Dr. Alexander Harroe
Performed by Caroline Cage-Satin

I'm filled with a dreadful urge to listen to this strange album. My heart pounding, I slide it out of its paper sleeve, set it on the turntable, and set the needle on the vinyl.

There's an initial crackle from dust and faint scratches, and then I hear the melancholy strains of a solo violin. The music is atonal, unusual, and hearing it makes me strangely dizzy. I have to steady myself against the arm of the love seat. My vision starts to go dark at the edges.

Suddenly the room falls away and I find myself standing upon a high, barren cliff above a huge lake with driving waves. The air has an unhealthy odor to it, and in the sky there hangs a trio of strange, misshapen moons. Opposite the setting twin suns, three black stars rise, their bright coronas gleaming through the streaked clouds.

When the dark starlight touches my face, it's as if a supernova has gone off in my mind. I fall to my knees on the lichen-covered rocks, unable to even take a breath to scream as my mind burns with a transcendent darkness, hot as any stellar cataclysm.

I hear footsteps and the rustling of robes, and through my tears I see a regal iron boot beneath an ochre hem embroidered with the tiny white bones of birds and mice.

"At last, you've arrived," the stranger says, in a voice that makes me want to drive spikes into my brain. "The little mother. So much consequence in such an inconsequential form."

I look up at him. His face is blank, pale. It doesn't look like flesh at all.

"Why are you wearing a mask?" I ask, my mind still reeling.

"Mask? Why, I wear no mask." He sounds amused.

"Why am I here?" I stammer.

"I wish to give you a clearer glimpse of your future."

The stranger leans down and touches my forehead with a bone-thin finger.

Suddenly, I am hovering above the hilltop, a millennia in the future. The mansion, the barn, the solar panels are all gone. In their place is an enormous, shuddering amorphous mass of gray-white flesh. It has no legs, no arms, no eyes. Hundreds of mutated creatures—some look like spiders, others like millipedes, others like cephalopods, and every form in between—swarm over the bloated

monstrosity, pulling squirming larvae from fleshy sacs that rupture like boils. The monstrosity moans, wracked by pain and pleasure in equal measure from this endless spawning process. Meanwhile, a steady train of other creatures brings food to the vast monster's hungry maw, a misshapen hole lined with rows of teeth that still look vaguely human …

"Oh my God," I gasp. I'm back at the stranger's feet, gripping lichen-covered rocks. "That's … that's what I become, isn't it? Oh God."

"It is," he replies evenly.

The fate I've just witnessed is unimaginably worse than death. "I … I can't … I won't…"

"But alas, you will. You will become the transformed Earth's new fertility deity. All-powerful yet helpless. Wise and yet mindless. Revered and yet an abomination. It's a terrible thing to become a living god."

"Please just kill me," I whisper.

"Oh, my adversaries have ensured that even I cannot." The stranger sounds amused again. "Your immortality is most irreversible."

"Jesus. Is there really nothing I can do?"

"There is one thing."

I look up at his uncanny face, afraid to hope. "What is it?"

"When you return to Earth, you will find a small gift from me. While you wear it, you shall not bear more offspring. You will have the power to escape and live out your immortality elsewhere."

"Why are you helping me?"

"I do not offer help. I offer a choice. The other gods offer you divinity and adoration. I offer a much more difficult, lonelier path."

"Why are you offering me this choice, then?"

"If you refuse the destiny for which you've been groomed, there will be no repopulation of this planet. The world will be silent but for the wind in the trees and the waves crashing upon the empty shores, just as I wish it to be. But the choice is yours."

★ ★ ★

I slowly regain consciousness in the study. The record has ended. I'm lying facedown on the wool Oriental carpet beside the love seat. It smells like dust and old mold.

A pale ring lies on the carpet, about a foot away from my face. I sit up and pick up the annulet. It's about three quarters of an inch in diameter, looks like it was carved from a cross section of bone—maybe a human radius—and has an inlay of the Yellow Sign. Putting it on is obviously a terrible idea. A terrible, awful, no-good idea. The only thing likely to be worse would be not putting it on.

"Here goes everything," I mutter.

And I slip the ring onto my right index finger. There's a bright flash of pain. Burning in my skin and a stabbing agony deep in the marrow of my finger bone. I try to pull the ring off, but that just makes it worse.

I stagger to my feet and go to one of the light sconces to see what the damage is. The ring has sprouted bony spikes through my skin and into my phalange. It's welded itself in place.

But on the plus side—and as far as I'm concerned, this is a *major* plus side—I can feel the ever-present itching around the five teratomatic encysted embryos subsiding. I touch one of the lumps and it feels softer. Like maybe it's dissolving.

"Hallelujah," I whisper.

★ ★ ★

"What the *shit* is that on your finger?" Savannah's eyes are wide, scared and furious.

I freeze, the platter of breakfast sausage in my hands. "It's a ring?"

"That's the fucking *Yellow Sign*. It does not belong on your goddamned hand. Take it off!"

"I … I can't?"

"The fuck you can't." Savannah gets up from her chair and storms around the dining room table. She grabs my hand and yanks on the

ring. The pain makes me scream so loudly she almost lets me go.

“I told you I can’t take it off!”

“Oh, I’ll take it off, trust me.” She grabs me by the wrist and drags me toward the kitchen.

“No! Stop!” I try to resist, but she’s far too strong.

“I told you what would happen if you forced my hand.” She pauses by the knife rack over the stove to grab a meat cleaver. “You’ve fucked around, and you’re about to find out.”

She’s going to chop off my finger or my hand. No. I’ll be maimed forever. I’ll be one more step down the road to becoming that limbless breeding monstrosity.

The panic in me rises to a heat that pulses down my arm to the ring. Suddenly I’ve jerked my hand out of her grip, cocked it back, and slammed my fist into the side of her head. Savannah’s knees buckle and she hits the floor like a sack of wet designer laundry. The meat cleaver clatters on the tiles and settles a few inches from my feet.

I’ve never hit anyone before in my entire life. When bullies messed with me at school, either Leila defended me or I just froze up, like I’m doing right now. I hit her really hard. It seems like my hand should hurt, but it doesn’t. The ring still feels warm. I guess it redirected all the force of the blow into Savannah.

Have I killed her? I kneel and feel for a pulse in her neck. Her heart’s still beating, strong and regular. I check under her eyelids. Her pupils both look the same. It seems that I only knocked her out.

But … should I kill her? She’s definitely going to try to dismember me when she wakes up. Killing her would be the smart thing to do. I pick up the cleaver, put it to her throat … and I just can’t do it. She’s unconscious. It just feels like a lot, to jump directly from punching my first person to murdering my first person.

So, clearly, I need to get the heck out of here. I dig through her jeans pockets and find her keys so I can finally get the hateful shackle off my ankle. Then I drag her into the laundry room and

wedge a chair under the doorknob. This won't hold her forever, but it should hold her long enough.

I run upstairs to start packing.

★ ★ ★

On my way out of the house with my stuffed-to-bursting external frame hiking backpack, I go into the nursery where Gregory lies sleeping on some folded towels, inside a large aquarium. I have only been in here once or twice, and I still haven't been able to get myself to pick him up.

"What am I going to do with you?" I mutter.

There are three obvious choices before me. First, I leave Gregory where he is and hope that Savannah takes care of him and doesn't turn him into a real monster. And that's supposing that I haven't put her in a coma. Because if I have, he'll slowly die of thirst in here.

Which leads to choice number 2: I kill him to preemptively put him out of his misery. But I don't actually know how to euthanize him quickly; I don't know how his anatomy works. Even if I did know what would constitute a fast, certain, killing blow, I'm not sure I have it in me. I could never sacrifice the rats in a biology lab. I don't even like killing hornets, and they're all absolutely vindictive jerks.

So, by default, that leaves choice number 3.

I take off my backpack, square my shoulders, and inhale deeply. March forward to the aquarium and lift off the lid. I can do this. I can. I *will*.

I reach down, pick up Gregory, and lift him into my arms.

He's heavier than I expected, probably ten pounds or so. His red skin is covered in a short silver fuzz that feels like velvet. His arms and body are warm and firm, with just a touch of squishiness. He smells … a bit like sardines, if I'm being honest. Not exactly that good baby smell people always talked about. Probably some room for improvement there.

His blue eyes open sleepily, and he yawns at me, seemingly unconcerned that I'm holding him and Savannah is nowhere to be

seen.

My rat brain is panicking right now. *You don't know anything about taking care of babies and this isn't even a baby oh Jesus what are you doing?*

Meanwhile, my superstitious mind says, *Have some faith. We can figure this out.*

I say to Gregory, "So, yeah. You wanna go look for Dr. Shapiro with me?"

He yawns again and smacks his tiny purple gums together. "Agafa."

"I will take that as a yes. Let's get your stuff together."

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